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PASSAGE TO DIVINITY

—THE EARLY LIFE OF SRI SWAMI RAMDAS—

BY

CHANDRA SHEKHAR

Second Edition

1955

Rs. 1/8

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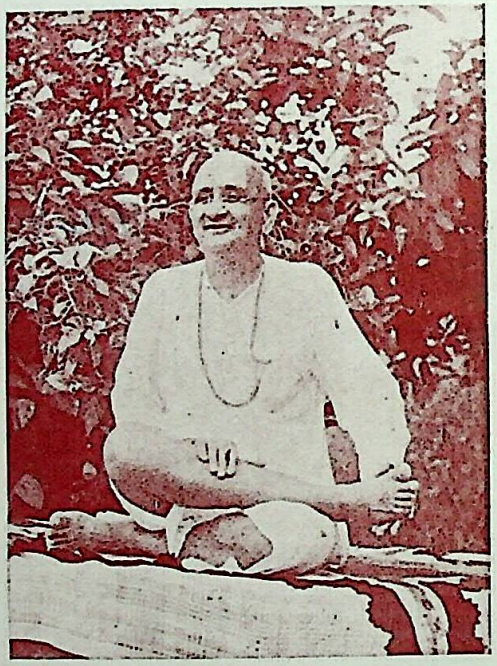

SWAMI RAMDAS

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BY

CHANDRA SHEKHAR

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Among thousands of men scarce
one striveth for perfection; of the
successful strivers scarce one
knoweth Me in essence.

Bhagavad Gita, vii, 3

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TO MY PARENTS
WITH LOVE

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It would be sheer euphemism to call this sketchy brochure a biography in any sense of the term; nor do I lay claim to any such high pretensions. However, I fondly trust that this humble work will prove to be a useful introduction to Swamiji's great autobiographical works, "In Quest of God" and "In the Vision of God." If it should create an interest in such of the readers as had not the privilege of coming into Swamiji's blessed contact to know more about him, his mission and his message to the world, I shall feel highly flattered and amply recompensed.

In this second edition certain personal references have been brought up-to-date. I have also included in this edition, as Chapter 23, the earlier part of the very interesting article on Swami Ramdas contributed by my cousin Padukone Ramanand to the Sannyas Silver Jubilee Souvenir; and, finally, a poem on Swamiji written by my wife in 1947. I tender my grateful thanks to Ramanand for having permitted me to make use of his article in the present edition and also to Dada Butani for his esteemed foreword.

Bombay
April 7, 1955

Chandra Shekhar

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FOREWORD

SWAMI Ramdas of Anandashram, Kanhangad (S.R.), is called Papa by most of his devotees. Papa's book "In Quest of God", fell into my hands at Bombay, sometime towards the end of 1937, apparently quite casually. I started reading it as soon as I saw it; and in the train, while returning to Karachi, I went through it several times. The style of it, the humour of it and the incidents and experiences! It was a rare joy indeed! On my next trip to Bombay, after a few weeks, still in 1937, I bought all his books and began "In the Vision of God" at once. This too I read several times, and with the same feeling of joy, wonder and relief. I met Papa at the end of January 1938, at Bombay with Mr. V. G. Dalvi, in the house of Mr. U. Sanjiv Rao, one Friday morning. As I was going, I kept wondering as to what my first experience was going to be. I had written to him a letter requesting him to come to Karachi; and he had responded immediately, saying that when he decided to go on his travels again, he would include Karachi in his tour programme. The fact that his response had been immediate and that he had consented to come to me! — Well! — I remember still the thrills it had sent into me and how I had left my College work and rushed to my brother — Principal S. B. Junnarkar and thence to my house, just to communicate the wonderful news. "So, he is coming! And to *me*!" That is how I had put it to them, at the time. "So

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I am going to meet him now!" That was my feeling at Bombay, as I entered his room.

Seated on a raised, cushioned seat, with a silken canopy over him, this almost-naked Sadhu, of whose wanderings with wounded feet I had read in his books, looked all joy and peace; and as I touched his feet with my forehead, he got up, came down and embraced me. My God! I was struck with wonder. A being, who, judging by all the canons I had read of, had realised God, i.e., had become one with Him, to go through this human act! But my mind ceased to work. I sat down and stuck to the place; I accompanied him wherever he went that day and left him late at night — listening to whatever fell out of his mouth and noting everything that happened. His smile was grand! His explanations — well these I had known in his books. The singing of Ganesh Heblekar, wherever we went, sent me into raptures. I had known sufistic songs of the sadness of separation; Ganesh, the Ashram Nightingale, sang songs of the joy of union: a very new experience it was.

The next day I met him late in the evening and left him again after midnight. The next day was a Sunday and I was once more with him in the morning and left him on Monday night, just in time for the train for Karachi. But the experience of that Sunday night, passed at Santa Cruz, in the house of Mr. Mukund M. Thakore, now Principal of the Ahmedabad Law College, is unforgettable. The whole night really — literally the whole night, till we got our tea or coffee in the morning — this Sadhu kept us roaring with laughter, by his vivid,

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humorous descriptions of some of the incidents described in the book, "In the Vision of God". In making us laugh at the attachments of the companion of his travels, Ramcharandas, he made us laugh at ourselves and put us, that way, on the road to freedom from them. A fine, subtle way of opening our eyes without the feeling of a hurt!

Well, I came back, and, in the train, I had time to think.

That the spiritual life must be a very sad and serious life, full of discomfort all along — that he, who had chosen it, must be going through a discipline of the most strenuous type, putting a powerful brake on himself, here, there and everywhere, that he must not laugh, and, if possible, he must put on a sombre, if not a weeping, look — Is not the entire burden of this miserable universe pressing heavily on his head all the time? — is something that we, in India — and perhaps elsewhere also — take for granted. That God must be very cruel — a Terrible Being — has been accepted always. Some systems of religious belief had brought Him down to the level of a merely Just Being, which it had done with the imaginary theory of Karma and Rebirth, that reminds one of the wolf's story, where "If you did not abuse me, your father must have done so" was what the wolf said to the lamb, it wanted to devour. Justice might be secured that way to the weak, unthinking mind: but it made God after all, a God of Retribution. Who would care for a God like that? That, of all lives, the spiritual one must be a life of sorrow and sadness, with no fun and joy — no humour, no joke! Unbearable! And that you must,

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in order to reach Him, pass through desert places, and steep inclines over dry, rugged mountains, cutting your clothes and skin with thorns and brambles, and must fast and look a fool! How can it be? Spiritual life must be, a Love-Story, full of fun and joy. And your passage to Him must be through sunlit glades and pastures, with sweet-singing birds and beautiful butterflies, fruits and flowers of fine smells and colours all along the paths, crossed by sparkling, murmuring rivulets. Why not?

Swami Ramdas himself bubbling with joy and freedom, his tender smile and look of infinite love and peace, his charming descriptions of incidents, of the heroic type, his fun at us and fun at all things and his absolute trust in God — these made it easy for me to believe what all my life I had longed to believe and privately did believe — that God must be a God of Love and Joy, and Fun and Play. Self-surrender to a God of Terror would be awful, to a God of Justice and Retribution, unpleasant; but to this God of Love, it would be pleasing and easy — at least easily accepted: and this self-surrender is Papa's only condition for a truly spiritual life. As for *sadhana,* there are no baths and no fasts, no inconvenient rising up in the early mornings and above all, no peculiar postures prescribed. Do what you like — only repeat His Name — whichever you please — all the time of the day and night that you are awake, doing all things as they come along, in the style of a secretary, so that all the activities that appear to flow from you are, in reality, planned and controlled by the Old Man, whose shoulders are broad enough for all your so-called burdens. Fine indeed! All sense of responsibility, and the trouble it means, gone at

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one stroke! Papa has got only one patent pill — the Name — for all the ills of the body and the mind. But it works!

He stays at an Ashram — the Anandashram (=the Abode of Joy) — as lovely as himself and his ways. There is only one condition for stay in that Ashram. There is a bell rung four times a day, when — wherever you be, whatever you be engaged in — you must run to the Dining Hall for break-fast, lunch, afternoon tea and dinner. For the rest, you may go in for any study you like or for any *sadhana* you please. You may pass your time with Papa himself and have your difficulties solved — though usually these solve themselves in the atmosphere of the place — and you may join the *bhajan* that goes on twice every day, for an hour or so each time.

The place is beautiful, on the top of a hill, with a higher hill behind it, with the sea in front roaring at you in the monsoon season, fair fields and sloping grounds all round. Look where you may, all is beauty. To this restful place, many persons go — of all shades of opinion, belonging to all religions, from far and near — and all feel happy and return convinced.....

The devotees of Swami Ramdas have had the natural curiosity to know some of the details of the life he lived before he entered the New One. One would be grateful, really, if every particular was available, of whatever kind, of the earlier life of a being like this — how and what he ate and drank, how he dressed, what games he played, what books he read, what his daily routine was,

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what his playmates, friends, teachers, and relatives, — his subordinates and superiors — thought of him — specially what his characteristics were, then, and what indications there were of his great future. This desire, I know, has been an expressed one and Mr. Chandra Shekhar has, after all, tried his best to satisfy it to some extent. Mr. Chandra Shekhar is the Swami's sister's son and also his son-in-law; and this personal relationship has given an added charm to the narrative.

N. B. BUTANI

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1

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

> These are the Prophets of the world, the Messengers of life, the Incarnations of God . . . . Whom else should we worship?
>
> —*Swami Vivekananda*

"Who is a saint?" In his "Divine Life", Swami Ramdas poses this question and he himself furnishes the answer in the significant lines that follow. "A saint is he who has attained the Eternal, lives in the Eternal and has realised the Eternal — call the great Reality by any name — the Eternal, God or Truth. Such a saint is a veritable blessing upon this earth. By his contact thousands are saved from the clutches of doubt, sorrow and death. He lives what he preaches and preaches what he lives. He awakens the sleeping souls to the awareness of their immortal and all-blissful nature. By his very presence he rids the hearts of people of their base and unbridled passions. A saint is a real redeemer and saviour of a fallen soul, for a saint is God Himself manifest in flesh and blood. The greatness of a saint is simply indescribable. We can only bend and bow to him and thus earn his ever fruitful benediction and grace."

Immeasurable is the debt of gratitude which our earth in travail owes to the saints and saviours, who have appeared on it from time to time, to succour the suffering

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humanity; to save mankind from oppression, strife, agony and sorrow; to relieve pain and misery in the world and confer in their place the unique blessings of divine peace, cheer, joy and goodwill. The history of the world is rich and replete with the everlasting contribution which these spiritual heroes have made to the religious, aesthetic and cultural life of the nations. These divine personalities have acted as a beacon to the ailing world, and have spread the divine and universal message of peace, harmony, love and freedom. Their touch has healed and elevated. Their very presence has brought sunshine and joy. Their word has galvanized the low and the fallen into intrepid souls of lofty ideals. Their compassion is proverbial. For the sake of the miserable and the down-trodden, they have sacrificed themselves and staked their all to bring them speedy relief. These divine masters have left behind them an indelible impress of their beneficent influence on civilization. On the pattern of their lives nations have fashioned themselves. Their lives have been a great self-luminous flare from which humanity has lit its own little earthen lamps of aspiration.

They have taught that man is essentially divine and that freedom from bondage and sorrow is his birthright. They have proclaimed that the supreme goal of self-realization is man's real and legitimate quest and have set, by their own lives, the steps by which the aspirant may follow up and attain it. The uplift of humanity in every sphere of life has been the supreme passion with these redeemers of mankind.

India is uniquely blessed, for it has been the cradle of spiritual culture and a home of saints and sages ever

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since the dawn of history. Time and again, our firmament has been lit up by luminaries of rare spiritual refulgence who have shed their divine light and blessings on this sacred soil. Even in our own times we see around us a galaxy of these great saints. Some have come to be known to the world, while others have shunned publicity and have hence remained unknown.

Saints are born as much as they are made. Some of these great souls show unmistakable signs of their divinity from their very birth; on a few others, God's grace has alighted, suddenly transforming and divinising them at once — the base metal being transmuted into pure burnished gold by a single contact with a saint or a God-man. Valmiki is a classic example of this class. While, others have attained that high stature of self-realization only through strenuous effort, untold suffering, severe and ceaseless austerities and hard and rigorous discipline. Many of these have reached their later beatific state only after a prolonged, testing ordeal, pursuing their supreme ideal with dogged determination, fighting the battle of life with dauntless courage, and finally emerging all-triumphant from the struggle.

These great souls, who have later attained their exalted state of divine illumination, seem to live apparently an average worldly existence for a certain period of their lives. To all intents and purposes their lives do not seem to differ in any way from ours. Life brings in its train to them joys and sorrows in equal measure as it does us. Rather, life appears to treat them more harshly and unkindly than it does us. Fortune rarely favours

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them; obstacles and frustrations dog their footsteps; every moment in their lives is a struggle. And we ask, in what especial way do they differ from us, the ordinary mortals, that they alone should become God's chosen few? In what especial way, more than ourselves, are they entitled to the Divine Grace which immortalizes them? But we forget that these are the heroes and supermen who have turned their very misfortunes into effective instruments to remove all obstacles and difficulties, whose one purpose and determination is, come what may, to reach the goal they have set before them, and who are ever ready and prepared to make the highest sacrifices, nay, to stake even their lives most cheerfully for the cause. To them defeat is unknown; hard knocks of life do not cow them down; death holds no terror to them. How can it be otherwise than that the Kingdom of Heaven should be theirs? Though, seemingly, they look to be ordinary mortals like us, a closer study of their lives reveals them as men of exalted moral stature, immense courage, strong sympathies, a warm heart and strong and earnest religious feeling and aspiration.

Naturally, we have a human interest in knowing the little details in the life of a saint, for there is as much for us to learn from his earlier worldly life as from his subsequent divine one. We like to know what outstanding qualities of head and heart fitted him out for his later spiritual life; how he met and overcame difficulties; what his outlook on life's little problems was and how he re-acted to them; to know the course and stages of his spiritual development and all the factors that helped and contributed towards the final triumph.

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Swami Ramdas, the subject of this sketch, who is hailed and revered as one of the greatest saints that modern India has produced, belonged to the world upto his thirty-seventh year and led a householder's normal existence. Yet, an undercurrent of potential spiritual greatness ran through the course of his worldly life — awaiting the psychological moment to reveal itself. Subtly came on the change from the worldly to the Divine. Slowly and gradually all the spiritual forces mustered strong and, when the supreme hour struck, they burst forth transforming and sublimating his entire life and being. All the shackles which bound him to the world were cut asunder. The very life was now cast into a new mould — at once radiant, divine and universal.

Of his life divine, the Swamiji himself has already written in his two autobiographical works of rare charm and inspiration, viz., "In Quest of God" and "In the Vision of God". But a large number of his admirers and devotees have evinced a keen and earnest desire to know more about the Swamiji's earlier life than they do now; and this humble attempt to present a short biography of his earlier life is the result of their united wishes.

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2

THE KANARA SARASWATS

But ye are a chosen generation.

—Holy Bible

The Kanara Saraswats, better known as Chitrapur Saraswats to distinguish them from other allied Saraswat communities, are one of the most advanced and highly intellectual communities of India. Although numerically a small community, the Saraswats are widely scattered all over India and Burma. Pursuit of employment has carried some of the Saraswat families to even more distant regions like the Persian Gulf and South Africa. But the chief centres of this community are the two Kanara Districts — the North and the South — and the city of Bombay and its suburbs.

The Saraswats came from the Aryan stock, and tradition has it that they had their original home in Kashmir. Later, they migrated towards the south and settled down on the banks of the river Saraswati; and presumably it was from its association with this river that the community derived its name. At a still later period, they wandered further to the South and settled down in Goa. When the Portuguese seized Goa in 1510 A.D., conditions became intolerable, and the

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inquisition and religious persecution drove the community farther south, and they finally found their home in the Kanara Districts.

The Chitrapur Saraswats are Rigvedi Smartha Brahmins owing allegiance to the spiritual Head of the Chitrapur *Math* at Shirali in North Kanara. This *Math* has been presided over by a succession of eminent and illustrious *Sannyasins,* well-known for their high intellectual and spiritual attainments.

The mother-tongue of the community is "Konkani" but it is not a written language and has no script of its own. Although it has a great similarity to Marathi, it is not a dialect of the Marathi language, though apparently derived from the same parent stock. But Konkani has infinite capacity to absorb foreign words and it has undergone considerable changes under the local influences — the language of those living in Mysore and the Kanaras being largely interspersed with Kannada words, while of those in the Bombay State, with Marathi words. But Konkani, as it is spoken today, is a delightful mixture of all these three with a choice sprinkling of the English vocabulary too!

The Saraswats are essentially an intellectual community and have for years been furnishing the Government offices with the cream of its manhood; and it is only in recent times that it has ventured into industrial and business lines. It can claim, with pride, to have produced eminent judges, lawyers, high Government officials both in Indian Civil Service and other departments, poets,

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philosophers, educationists and social reformers. The great saints Appayya and Shantabai of Bhatkal came from the Saraswats.

The Saraswats are a highly cultured people and, educationally, considerably advanced. The community takes a first rank in the matter of education imparted to its boys and girls. Even years ago, when the educational system had not advanced as far as it has done now, the Saraswat women, nevertheless, derived their culture and learning from Marathi lore and literature.

The one remarkable trait of the community is its enormous capacity to adjust and adapt itself to its environments. It holds advanced views on social reforms. Long before the National Congress took up the cause of the Harijans, it was a Saraswat of South Kanara, the late Kudmul Ranga Rao, later on known as Swami Iswaranand, who started a movement for their uplift and amelioration, even at the heavy price of social ostracism.

And it was in this gifted community that Swami Ramdas took his birth in the year 1884.

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3

ANCESTRY

Land of my sires! What mortal hand
Can 'ver untie the filial bond
That knits me to thy rugged strand.

—*Sir Walter Scott*

Forty five miles to the South of Mangalore, in the District of South Kanara, lies the little town of Hosdrug facing the Arabian Sea. Hosdrug or "Hosa-durga", meaning, in Kannada, a "new fort", owes this name to the fort then newly built by a commander of the Ikkeri Kingdom, about 300 years ago. This town lies on the Southern Railway but its station, however, goes by the name of Kanhangad. "Anandashram", the holy abode of Swami Ramdas, lies at a distance of about 2½ miles from this town.

About the late seventies, three or four Saraswat families had settled down in the town of Hosdrug. Of these, we are immediately concerned with two, namely, the Trikannad and the Padukone families. Trikannad Rama Rao was a "Monegar" or Revenue Inspector in Government service, a position which in those days brought to him much influence and respect. He had two sons and four daughters. The head of the other family was Padukone Shama Rao, who had retired from Gov-

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ernment service and had settled down in Hosdrug with his eldest son, Balakrishna Rao. Both these families were held in high esteem and affection by the local people. Both these families lived in perfect concord with each other and, before long, they were knit together by a further bond of marriage alliance between them. Lalitha Bai, the third daughter of Trikannad Rama Rao, was given in marriage to Balakrishna Rao, the eldest son of Shama Rao.

Life in those days was beautifully simple. The modern luxuries and amenities were unknown. The Railway had not yet made its appearance and journeys from one place to another had to be done by bullock cart. Human wants were few and a rupee went much farther in the economic life of the people than it does now. The modern civilization had not crept in, destroying in its wake the sylvan simplicity of men and women. The villages were self-sufficing units and young men had not yet begun their migration to towns and cities in quest of livelihood. The main occupation was agriculture and life was then much more prosperous than it is in these days. In brief, it was a transitional phase between the old and the new India.

The two Saraswat families — Trikannad and Padukone — were profoundly religious in their outlook and were strict followers of the *Bhagavat-dharma*. Mornings would be spent by the male folk in the ceremonious worship of the family deity. In the afternoons, when men were at their different vocations, the women of the two households would gather together and the Puranic Scriptures would be read out and translated by one of the elderly members of the assembled group. In the

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evenings again, the young and the old would gather together and sing *bhajan* for a couple of hours daily. The most important festival of the year was the celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi. The children in the family looked forward to this annual event with especial interest and eagerness. All the members of the house, from far and near, would gather together for the occasion and there would be much feasting, and a spirit of camaraderie would reign all around.

Shama Rao lived up to the ripe old age of ninety and had, in the latter period of his life, lost his sight. Yet, until about a couple of months prior to his demise, Shama Rao would himself perform with clock-like regularity the elaborate worship of the family deity. The writer still remembers the tall, gaunt figure of Shama Rao feeling his way through the house to the sanctuary where the deity was installed, and doing the *puja* unaided, despite his blindness and old age. He passed away in the year 1910 full of years, loved by his children, grand-children and great-grand-children. Befitting his life, his end came most peacefully and at a most auspicious hour too. It was a Monday and an *Ekadashi* at that — a day held most sacred by the Hindus. His eldest son, Balakrishna Rao, was at his usual evening *bhajan* together with three of his youngest children and a grandson, and it was to the tune of the sacred name of the Lord that Shama Rao's earthly career came to a close. Blessed death indeed!

Shama Rao's wife, Durga Bai, had predeceased him by a few years. She was a simple and lovable soul. Although unlettered, she knew by heart hundreds of songs composed by the Maharashtra saints and she would sing them every evening in her melodious voice.

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4

A GENEROUS UNCLE

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere
Heav'n did a recompense as largely send.

—*T. Gray*

Shama Rao had three sons and three daughters. The three sons were Balakrishna Rao, Deva Rao and Narayan Rao; the three daughters, Radha Bai, Janhavi Bai and Bhavani Bai.

The youngest son, Narayana Rao, lived only for about 25 years. He was a born *Avadhut.* He took little interest in his bodily existence and was absolutely insensible to his surroundings. To all external appearances he looked extremely weak-minded and stupid. But he was meek and submissive. He was not permitted to go out of the house, but only a small length of a thin thread, tied to his arms or legs and to a post nearby, sufficed to keep him at a place for hours together. The singing of *bhajan* or devotional songs had the remarkable effect of rousing him up from his apparent stupor and, wherever he might be, he would want to be taken to the room where *bhajan* was sung; and during the *bhajan,* he was always found to be in a blissful and ecstatic mood. It is said that on a certain Shivarathri day he was seen actually rolling in a heap of ashes.

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The second son Deva Rao was in Government service in Coorg. Later, he resigned his appointment there and set up practice as a lawyer at Kasaragod, a town fifteen miles to the north of Hosdrug. Soon he built up an extensive practice and became one of the leaders of the local Bar. Deva Rao was extremely liberal minded, selfless in his outlook and generous to a fault. Anecdotes of his lavish charity are still current in Kasaragod in the circles in which he moved. He had no issues of his own but he loved and regarded the children of his elder brother, Balakrishna Rao, as his own and was financially of very great help to his brother. In fact, most of the latter's children owed their education to their generous uncle's bounty. Deva Rao was a good speaker and a good writer. He had a very keen sense of wit and humour, which he, along with his brother, Balakrishna Rao, had inherited in a large measure from their father. He was, like his father, of a tall stature.

One of the daughters of Shama Rao, Janhavi Bai, was a saintly soul. She was intensely religious and spiritual-minded even from her childhood. Although she did not know how to read or write, she propounded the great philosophic truths in so simple a manner and explained even the most difficult passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* and other scriptures so beautifully as to charm and impress her listeners. In her home at Kasaragod, a large number of ladies used to gather around her in the afternoons to hear her expound to them on the eternal verities.

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5

A BLESSED COUPLE

Who God doth late and early pray,
More of his grace than gifts to land,
And entertains the harmless day,
With a well-chosen book or friend.

—*Sir H. Wotton*

Balakrishna Rao, the eldest son of Shama Rao, began his official career quite early in life. He had passed the General Test Examination, which in those days was the minimum standard for entrance into Government service. He joined the Sub-Registrar's Office at Hosdrug as a clerk on a petty salary of Rs. 12 per mensem and it gradually rose to Rs. 20.

As we have said already, Balakrishna Rao married Lalitha Bai, the third daughter of Rama Rao. Lalitha Bai was a pure soul, endowed with a sympathetic heart, a kindly disposition and a sweet, forgiving nature. Her bearing was upright and dignified and her countenance shone with austere nobility. She was a devoted partner in life to Balakrishna Rao and a loving mother to her children.

Swami Ramdas has given us a brilliant portrait of this couple, his parents, in the *Vision* for December 1934 and this article has since been included in his later pub-

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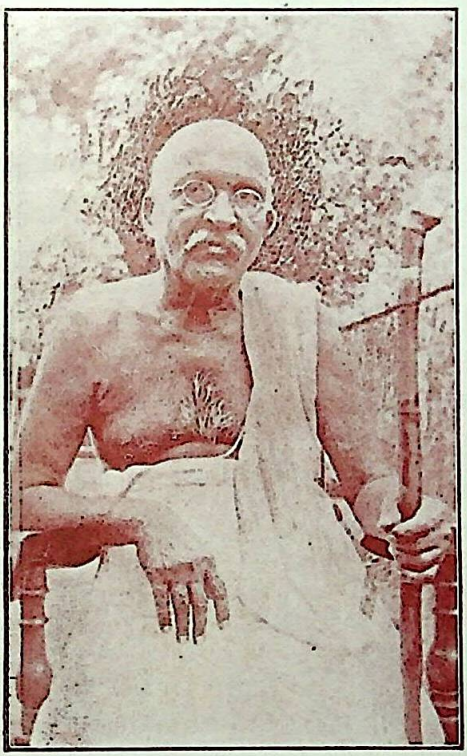

SRI BALAKRISHNA RAO
(Gurudev)

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lished work entitled "The Divine Life". The writer cannot do better than quote what Swamiji himself says about his parents.

Balakrishna Rao's "official career was marked by his unflagging application, zeal and sincerity. His harmless, forgiving and simple nature endeared him both to his colleagues and superior officers. But the beauty and greatness of his life lay in his relations with the outside world and with the family that grew around him.

"This divine couple, by their ideal life of householders, held up before the world an example as to how life in the world could be made supremely blessed and glorious. Selfless service at home and of guests that poured into their house was the keynote of their lives".

In those days, when trains from Madras used to run only as far as Cannanore, people from Mangalore going to or returning from Madras or other places in the south, on business or pleasure, had to make a halt at Hosdrug and then resume their journey to Cannanore by boats, or to Kasaragod by bullock carts, as the case might be. To all these people Balakrishna Rao's house offered ready and willing hospitality, and not a day passed without a guest or two being entertained. With his meagre means and a growing family around him, he could hardly make both ends meet. Yet he and his wife served their guests most cheerfully.

"Except for about an hour or two of recess during the midday when Balakrishna Rao would be at home, he was busy the whole day in the office. Before or after meal he would not fail for a single day to sit up with his

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children for prayers and *bhajan* for an hour. He would sing aloud, in his own way, with overflowing love and faith, the celebrated Marathi songs of the Maharashtra saints, and the popular saint Tukaram was his favourite. His children would join with him in chorus whenever he sang the names of God. After supper, until he went to bed, except of course, when he was attending on guests, he would be absorbed in reading religious books."

One of his most favoured songs, during the *bhajan*, was saint Tukaram's song which began as:

बुडलों भवसागरीं विठोबा । तारी रे दयाळा तारी रे कृपाळा ॥

It meant, in English rendering, "O Vithoba, plunged am I in the ocean of *samsara* (worldly life), save me, O Compassionate One, save me, O Kind One!" The family deity was goddess Shanthadurga but Balakrishna Rao's *Ishtadevata* was Sri Vithoba of Pandharpur.

"Sri Balakrishna Rao's faith in the goodness of God was firm and unshakable. In all moments of trial and loss, common to householders, he would rely solely on God for strength, patience and peace. He was a stranger to despair and despondency, to which even men of strong will in the world sometimes fall a prey."

One day, the thatched roof of the bath house, adjoining the house occupied by Balakrishna Rao and his family, accidentally caught fire and his house, which had also a thatched roof, was in the imminent danger of catching fire too. Balakrishna Rao's friends importuned him to remove the household goods or at least the family deity to a safer distance, before the conflagration spread

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to the house. But Balakrishna Rao stoutly declined to accede to their entreaties. "I refuse to remove anything from the house," he said; "let us have faith in the mercy of Sri Shanthadurga (the family deity). She will save us." So saying he went into the room where the deity was installed and prayed for a long while. The prayer was heard. The wind changed its course and the house was saved from disaster. It may be mentioned here that the entire town of Hosdrug ran to Balakrishna Rao's help that day to quench the spreading fire and thereby demonstrated the affection and esteem in which the local people held him.

Calamities, one after another, befell Balakrishna Rao. He lost one of his daughters, Uma Bai, in 1906 and his wife in 1914. Two more of his dear children passed away in the eventide of his life. But the extraordinary fortitude and equanimity with which he bore all these repeated shocks filled his friends and relations with admiration and wonderment.

"Balakrishna Rao had an unparalleled sense of humour and his witticisms are even now current amongst those who had the privilege of his society. One conspicuous trait in his character was his equal vision. He never asserted the false sense of authority either of a father over his children or of a master over his household. He was so simple and tolerant that he would talk freely and even play sometimes with his children."

In his later years his grandchildren became his boon companions. He threw himself like a child into their company, and delighted to entertain them with varied

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and endless anecdotes. In all matters he became their friend, philosopher and guide. Few grandfathers, perhaps, have commanded that fondness and affection from their grandchildren as Balakrishna Rao did.

Balakrishna Rao, unlike his father or younger brother Deva Rao, was of a short stature. His countenance beamed with joy and his eyes sparkled with merriment. A good joke made him burst out into a boisterous, boyish laughter.

Balakrishna Rao was leading the life of perfect surrender to the will of God. On his bed, at night, he would daily offer a silent prayer to God and then go to sleep. Like a child, free from cares and worries, he would fall asleep within less than two minutes after laying himself down. Although apparently he had a big family to support on his meagre salary, he was a stranger to worry of any description. Because he knew that the burden was not his but the Lord's and he lived up to this conviction.

He had a great love for art, and this gift was richly inherited by almost all his sons. He used to relate how fond he was of drawing pictures and making models of clay in his child-hood, and how this aptitude for art was severely suppressed by his well-meaning father, who thought that his son's future might suffer if he were allowed to indulge in this fancy of his.

Balakrishna Rao belonged to an orthodox and conservative age but the opinions he held on some of the burning questions of the day were far in advance of his times. When one of his younger sons proposed to contract

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marriage from outside his own community, Balakrishna Rao not only readily approved of the proposal but also most cheerfully sent his blessings to the couple.

"Sri Balakrishna Rao's popularity with all classes of people in Hosdrug was truly marvellous. He had not a single enemy. He was kind, affable and friendly towards all and everybody loved him for his frank, trusting and lovable nature. It was clearly evident in his life that his vision was not confined to his family and relations but extended to all beings and creatures alike. Verily, he belonged to the race of saints and sages who possessed the vision of the universal brotherhood of man."

The union of Balakrishna Rao and Lalitha Bai was blessed with thirteen issues — ten sons and three daughters. They were: Narsing Rao, Ananda Rao, Ganesh Rao, Sitaram Rao, Lakshmi Devi, Vittal Rao, Sanjiva Rao, Srinivasa Rao, Uma Bai, Girija Bai, Sunder Rao, Dinker Rao and Shivashankar Rao. Of these children, Ananda Rao, Ganesh Rao, Sitaram Rao, Srinivasa Rao and Sunder Rao among his sons and Uma Bai and Girija Bai among his daughters are, unhappily, no more.

And it is with the life of Vittal Rao, the sixth child of this blessed couple, who is now known to the world as Swami Ramdas, that we are chiefly concerned here.

It will be related in some detail later how Balakrishna Rao was destined to become "Gurudev" or spiritual father as well, to his son Vittal Rao, in course of time.

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6

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Whenever virtue subsides and vice prevails,
I come down to help mankind.

—*Bhagavad Gita, iv. 7*

The birth of Vittal Rao took place at Hosdrug at midday, on Thursday, the 10th April 1884. It was a day of the full moon and, what was more significant, it happened to be the day of Hanuman Jayanti, *i.e.*, the birthday of Hanuman, the greatest devotee of Bhagavan Sri Ramachandra. This happy synchronisation seemed to augur well in advance the great future that was in store for the child born that day to Balakrishna Rao and Lalitha Bai.

For the benefit of those readers who are interested in astrology, the astral chart of Vittal Rao's nativity is given below:

<table>
<tr><td>Ravi
12</td><td>Budha 5
Ketu 1</td><td>Shukra 1
Shani 1</td><td>Mandi</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">VITTAL'S
HOROSCOPE</td><td>Kuja 7
Guru 5
Lagna</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td><td>Rahu
7</td><td>Chandra
6</td></tr>
</table>

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According to Western astrology, the Arians, *i.e.*, those born between 21st March and 20th April are described in the words of a noted Astrologer, as having "strong, forceful, dynamic, determined characters. Free children of Mars, they are self-reliant, energetic, courageous, impulsive and impatient of control and restraint, being full of spirit, both physically and mentally.... Arians are frequently brilliant conversationalists, being witty, loquacious, magnetic and often prophetic; they are rarely dull or uninteresting." These great qualities described above proved too true of the child that Lalitha Bai gave birth to on that blessed day.

The child was given the name of Vittal after Sri Vithoba of Pandharpur, the favourite deity of Balakrishna Rao. He was rarely subject to illness in his infancy. The one remarkable thing about him, that people who saw him then observed, was the extraordinary lustre of his eyes. His father used to relate how a wandering *sannyasin,* who saw the child Vittal, had predicted a brilliant future that was in store for him.

The child grew into a boy. By his winsome and vivacious ways he endeared himself to everyone in the house. When Vittal was about four years old, a famous astrologer of the place predicted that the boy would attain a very high position in life. As, in those days, the post of a Deputy Collector was supposed to be the highest status in official life an Indian could aspire to, our imaginative village astrologer added that Vittal would one day become a Deputy Collector! On hearing this forecast, Shama Rao smilingly asked his little grandson

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Vittal — he was called by the pet name of "Vittu" by all — what he would give his grand-parents when he became a Deputy Collector. Immediately Vittal set the house in roars of laughter by his ready-witted reply saying that he would give his grandpa a pair of ear-rings and his grandma a pair of anklets with silver bells! Vittal has indeed, in his later life, attained not the petty Deputy Collectorship that the limited knowledge of the astrologer could foresee, but a position which is the envy of the Rajas and Maharajas and the ideal of thousands of seekers after Truth!

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7

AT SCHOOL

Why did my parents send me to the school
That I with knowledge might enrich my mind,
Since the desire to know first made men fools,
And did corrupt the root of all mankind?

—*Sir J. Davis*

Vittal was admitted into the local school when he was about six years old. His teacher was a typical village school-master immortalized by Poet Goldsmith in his poem. He freely made use of the birch; and woe to the boy who incurred his displeasure!

"Yet he was kind; or if severe in aught
The love he bore to learning was in fault."

He severely punished the boys who absented themselves from his class. He seemed to have an uncanny knack of finding out the boys in hiding and thrashing them back to school! Vittal was not overfond of his school or his books, and so came in for a large measure of his teacher's wrath. He often played truant, but in vain did he hide himself in the bathroom or in the loft of the cow-pen, for his ubiquitous teacher was well aware of the favourite haunts of his recalcitrant pupil.

Vittal was full of animal spirits and mischievous pranks. His favourite pastime was climbing up tall trees

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like the cocoanut and the banyan. In front of their house, running parallel to their garden, was a long avenue of tall banyan trees. Vittal would climb up one of these trees and hop from branch to branch and tree to tree with the agility of a monkey, until he had covered a furlong's distance in this way, before he got down. Another usual recreation with him was to execute successive somersaults. A merchant, whose shop lay on his way to the school, often invited Vittal to perform this feat before him and presented him with a piece of jaggery after every performance.

Vittal's pranks sometimes sorely tried the patience of his parents and earned for him severe chastisement at their hands. But he always preferred being punished by his mother, as he could always be sure of getting sweets from her after the punishment!

From his childhood Vittal was of a jovial disposition and of a cheerful, care-free temperament. He knew not, even as a boy, what fear was and he loved adventure. But he held his school and his books in small esteem; and arithmetic was the one subject he hated most heartily, and it continued to be his pet aversion even in the higher classes. Yet, even though his attention to his lessons was perfunctory, he got promotion to the higher classes without much effort every year, until he passed the Third Form, the highest class in the local Middle School.

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8

A ROVING SCHOLAR

For a jolly good book whereon to look,
Is better to me than gold.

—J. Wilson

Vittal was sent to Mangalore for the High School course and he joined the Mission High School there. This school was at that time run by the Basel German Mission.

Vittal's High School career too was marked by his extreme indifference to studies and supreme dislike for his text-books. But he had cultivated a great thirst for general knowledge, and was, for his age, well-informed on most of the subjects. Although he refused to be cramped by the school curriculum, he became a voracious reader and read all the books of general interest he could lay his hands upon. At this time he developed a liking for the literary works of the English masters. He got a lot of these books from the school library and elsewhere, and read them with avidity. If he came across a good book, he would sit up and read it through before laying it down — very often converting the night into day. This taste for literature enabled Vittal to acquire even at so early an age a remarkable finesse and facility in his English style.

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Describing this period of Vittal's life, his younger brother, Sanjiva Rao, observes in his reminiscences published in Vol. III of the *Vision:*—"His was a free spirit and he found his joy more in the masterpieces of great English authors than in going through the dull routine of a schoolboy confined to his text-books. His extensive reading made him a master of English. I had the peculiar good fortune of receiving letters from him ever since my boyhood and his superb English was at once the envy and admiration of people who chanced to read them.

"His intelligence even as a student was of a high order. Whatever he once read he made his own. While an average boy had to plod through the lessons, he never had to do this. He was a stranger to what in school language is known as 'cramming'."

Vittal was even then a good conversationalist and had inherited from his father an unequalled sense of wit and humour. He would, as he does even now, raise roars of laughter from his listeners by the unique manner in which he related incidents from his own life or observations. "The humour always lay in the narrative of an event than in the event itself and he knew it." He had also an innate talent for histrionics and mimicry. Whatever be the situation he was placed in for the time being, it was the lighter side of it rather than the serious one that appealed to his keen sense of the comic and the ludicrous in life.

Another trait, early noticeable in Vittal, was a spirit of stubborn independence. He refused to follow the

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beaten track but exercised his own independent outlook on life and things. His brother further writes of him: "Because a certain number of people had accepted a certain thing as true, he would not blindly accept it. He would discuss the matter thoroughly with his friends, the discussions, however, almost always leaving him unconvinced."

Vittal was in his youth, as he has been ever since, extremely simple in his tastes and habits. Again, to quote his brother Sanjiva Rao, "Both as a boy and young man, he was extremely indifferent to his wardrobe. He would not mind what clothes he wore or how he wore them. Ever bright and cheerful, he did not care for — I might almost say that he defied — the world's opinion in this matter or, for the matter of that, on any other."

As could be expected, Vittal lagged behind in his studies. In due course, the Selection Examination for the Matriculation was held and the results were soon to be announced. Vittal was not quite hopeful of his success in it and he avoided meeting the Headmaster, who was also the science teacher, outside the class room. But, unfortunately for him, one day a friend arrived from Hosdrug wanting to see the Headmaster on some business and he requested Vittal to escort him to his place. The friend could not be disobliged, and most reluctantly Vittal accompanied his friend to the Headmaster's house. After the preliminary talk, the Headmaster enquired of Vittal if he knew how many marks he had secured in Chemistry. This query from the Headmaster sent shivers through his frame and made him very uncomfortable. Getting no reply from Vittal, the Headmaster proceeded

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to draw a big circle with his finger in front of him and told his pupil that that figure indicated the number of marks he had obtained in his subject! The results were announced but Vittal's name was not in the list of candidates sent up for the examination. This failure, however, had little effect on him and left him absolutely unperturbed. He returned home.

Next year, Vittal joined the Christian High School at Udipi. Here he appeared for the Matriculation at the end of the year but was unsuccessful. He came back to his home at Hosdrug and, to quote his own words, "enlisted himself to the sublime profession of idleness."

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9

THE ARTIST AND ACTOR

Nature I loved and, next to Nature, Art.

—*W. S. Landor*

Vittal was now sixteen years of age. He had no desire to appear again for the Matriculation Examination. His one idea now was to go to Bombay and secure some employment there. But his parents were averse to sending him to Bombay at so early an age. His repeated requests to be allowed to proceed to Bombay met with a bland refusal from them. Vittal bided his time.

One day, when his father was away at the office, Vittal suddenly appeared before his mother and told her of his resolve to go to Bombay; but before the poor lady could recover from her surprise and find words to protest, Vittal had already left the house and was running along the road leading to Kasargod. The helpless mother called to her aid a fat servant boy, who was standing nearby, and instructed him to pursue Vittal, catch him up and bring him back. But the boy was a poor match to Vittal, who was a swift runner. Vittal had covered thus a distance of about four miles, hotly chased by the panting boy, when he came to the ferry. Luckily for him, the only boat of the ferry was lying on this side of the bank, and Vittal jingling a few coins that he had in

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his pocket, beckoned the boatman to row him across the river immediately. He was on the other side of the river, when the fat servant boy arrived at it. Vittal, seeing his pursuer helplessly gazing at him from across the river, danced in glee, cutting capers and making faces at him. Vittal thence continued his journey, while the poor boy had no alternative but to return home and report the failure of his mission to his mistress.

Vittal soon covered the rest of the distance of eleven miles on foot and arrived at Kasaragod. He directly went to his uncle Deva Rao's house, as his sole object in going to Kasaragod was to seek his uncle's financial help for going to Bombay. Deva Rao was surprised at his nephew's sudden appearance but the nephew had no nerve to open the subject of his exact intentions. Thus three days passed by, when, in the meanwhile, Deva Rao received a letter from his brother, apprising him of the true nature of Vittal's escapade from his home. Deva Rao called his nephew to his side and kindly but severely took him to task for coming away in defiance of his parents' wishes. There were no trains running in those days. Deva Rao engaged a bullock cart and, instructing the cartman to take Vittal straight to his house at Hosdrug, packed his nephew off! Vittal returned home full of disappointment and chagrin and would not leave his house for some days, as his friends were only too ready to rag him with uncomfortable questions on his supposed trip to Bombay and what all he did there!

Plague had now broken out at Mangalore in a virulent form and the schools were temporarily closed. Many of Vittal's friends studying at Mangalore now returned to Hosdrug. The friends joined together and

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started an Amateur Dramatic Society. Vittal took a prominent part in the activities of the Society. He painted three nice curtains — the first with Sri Krishna with flute, the second with a magnificent building and the third with some forest scenery. Besides this, his services were also requisitioned for preparing costumes and crowns for the actors.

There was an out-house in Balakrishna Rao's garden, which went by the grandiose name of "bungalow". The rehearsals of the dramas were held in this out-house. Altogether three dramas were staged by the Amateur Dramatic Society. The first drama to be staged consisted of some scenes from Shakespeare's King John. Vittal took a minor part in this drama. In another he acted the role of a clown, and his superb acting brought the house down with resounding cheers and uproarious laughter. The third drama dealt with the life of Shivaji, the founder of the Mahratta Empire, and Vittal acted the part of Samarth Ramdas, the great Maharashtra saint and Guru of Shivaji. Whoever in the audience then knew that this boy, who so well acted the part of Samarth Ramdas, would, years after, become equally famous as another Ramdas and be regarded by hundreds of his followers in Maharashtra as the very incarnation of his great namesake!

The activities of the Dramatic Society served to bring into prominent relief the considerable talent that Vittal possessed for art. Even as a student he evinced a great love for art and was fond of drawing caricatures of his teachers in the class-room. His parents now decided to send Vittal to Madras to take a course in Fine Arts in the School of Arts there.

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10

MADRAS AND BOMBAY

And remember that the best of
friends must part.

—*Anonymous*

In due time Vittal Rao came to Madras and settled down with his elder brother, Sitaram Rao, who was then employed as an Inspector in the Passport Department. Vittal Rao joined the school of Arts and took a course in drawing and engraving. The study of art was very much after his heart and he set himself to it with great zeal and earnestness. His progress was very remarkable and within a period of six months he attained such a high degree of proficiency in his subjects as would require an average student at least two years to reach. But the entire course at the Arts School was spread over a period of seven years; and even after this long and arduous course of study at the School of Arts, the future prospects that it held out in life were, as Sitaram Rao discovered later, none too bright. So he did not favour the idea of his younger brother continuing further in the School of Arts. At this juncture a new opportunity for Vittal Rao presented itself.

Dhareshwar Sadashiva Rao, a Saraswat gentleman of Madras, now instituted, in memory of his father,

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VITTAL RAO
(at 18)

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scholarships for two students from his community for training in technical courses at the Victoria Jubilee Technical Institute of Bombay. Luckily for Vittal Rao, he was selected for one of the studentships, while the other was given to another young man, Hattiangadi Madhav Rao by name.

Both the scholarship holders proceeded to Bombay to join the V.J.T. Institute but were informed on arriving there that all the seats in the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering sections had already been filled up. So they had to take up the Textile Engineering course.

The donor of the scholarships was very particular that these two young men did not waste their time in Bombay. So he requested Sir N. G. Chandavarkar, who was then a Judge of the Bombay High Court, to be the local guardian of the two scholarship holders and these, in turn, were asked to report themselves to the guardian once a week. Accordingly, Vittal Rao and Madhav Rao would wait upon their guardian every Sunday. But after some time they observed that Sir Chandavarkar found little time to take any interest in his wards, amidst his many pre-occupations — official and social — and they stopped altogether their weekly visits to their august guardian.

During the first two years of his stay in Bombay, Vittal Rao lived with his friend Vadiraj who was employed in a German Dye Firm. Vadiraj was a large-hearted soul and was so kind and loving towards Vittal Rao that a warm and memorable friendship grew up between them. Whenever Vadiraj got new clothes made for himself, he must needs get them done for Vittal Rao

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also. During holidays Vittal Rao would work in the laboratory attached to the office where his friend worked. Through him, again, Vittal Rao got from the Petit Library a great many books that dealt in philosophy, religion, fiction and poetry. Vittal Rao was now seized with a great passion for poetical and dramatic works. He read and re-read Shakespeare whose great dramas gripped his soul. He became a devoted student of the works of Burke and Carlyle. The lives and writings of Swami Vivekananda and Rama Tirtha also captured his heart. At this time he also came across the literature of the Rationalists' Association of America. He read with eager interest Ernst Heckel's "The Riddle of the Universe" and Grant Allen's "The Evolution of the Idea of God". He developed a great liking for the publications of this Association and even desired to become its member. He applied for the membership but no reply was received.

Now a sad event took place. Vadiraj, the best friend that Vittal Rao had, with whom he was staying all along in Bombay, fell ill and died. This calamity affected Vittal Rao not a little. For days together it left him disconsolate and grieving over the passing away of his dearest friend.

After the death of Vadiraj, Vittal Rao shifted to the room occupied by his Institute friends, Madhav Rao and K. D. Nerurkar. As was his wont his application to his studies was indifferent. Yet, when there was barely a month or two for the final examination, he sat up day and night to study his books and got through the examination with success. Thus, at the end of the three years' course at the V.J.T. Institute, Vittal Rao received his diploma in Textile Manufacture and he came back to his brother Sitaram Rao at Madras.

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11

ON THE THRESHOLD OF LIFE

The web of our life is of a mingled
yarn, good and ill together.

—*Shakespeare*

Between Vittal Rao and his brother Sitaram Rao there existed a strong bond of mutual love, regard and affection. Both were endowed with similar characteristics and tastes. Sitaram Rao was, like his younger brother, courageous and daring, and stubbornly independent in his views. He had a great flair for art, literature and acting. With him too Shakespeare was a hot favourite. He wrote a bold and beautiful hand and his English style was graceful and charming. He was extremely generous and noble-hearted. Like Vittal Rao, he also was very witty and engaging in conversation. Thus to the kinship of blood between the two brothers was added an affinity of temperaments.

Sitaram Rao had just then started a handloom and soap-making industry in Madras, when his brother returned from Bombay, after the completion of his course at the V.J.T. Institute. Vittal Rao with his expert knowledge was now of immense help to his brother in putting his new industrial concern in a proper running gear.

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The cloth turned out in the handloom factory was much appreciated by the public and even won for it some medals at exhibitions. But Vittal Rao had little scope there for putting to practical use his three years' training in textile manufacture, as his services could be useful only in a power-driven cotton mill. About this time he received a letter from his father asking him if he was agreeable to marry. Vittal Rao sent an emphatic reply in the negative.

Soon after, he secured an appointment as Spinning Master in a cotton mill at Gulbarga. When Vittal Rao had been there for three or four months, he got one day a telegram from his father with a proposal for his marriage. The alliance had all been settled by his parents and now it only remained for the son to wire his consent. His mother, who was ill and practically bed-ridden for some years now, had already given her consent to the marriage on behalf of her son. Vittal Rao wavered and hesitated for some time. To refuse once more, when events had advanced so far, would have been regarded by his parents as landing them into disgrace. Even the date for the marriage had been settled upon, in anticipation of his consent. Finally, Vittal Rao yielded and wired back his consent.

This happened in the year 1908. Vittal Rao obtained leave and came down to Mangalore for his wedding. The bride was Uma Bai, the second daughter of M. Rama Rao, an insurance agent at Mangalore. As is the custom among the Saraswats, the bride was given the name of Rukma Bai, the consort of Vithoba of Pandharpur, by her parents-in-law, on her entry into her husband's family.

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Rukma Bai was a cultured lady with a strongly religious bent of mind. Having been brought up in a family known for its rigid orthodoxy, she had naturally to some extent an orthodox and conservative bias. But the views held by her husband, especially in matters relating to religion, were entirely at variance with her own. He was frankly a modernist in his outlook and opinions while she belonged to the conservative school of thought. Yet, in course of time, she subordinated her own ideals to those of her husband and fell in with his line of thought.

Vittal Rao returned to Gulburga after his marriage and rejoined his duties. But within a couple of months, the management of the mill where he was employed changed hands. The new owners dispensed with his services and Vittal Rao returned to Madras in search of fresh employment.

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12

LIFE, AN AWRY TALE

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife.

—*Longfellow*

The story of Vittal Rao's life of service is the story of a chequered career. It appeared as if Dame Fortune took especial delight in playing her vile tricks on him. Throughout his life in service, brief periods of employment were followed by longer periods of unemployment and idleness. Before he had hardly settled down at one place, depending upon the appointment he had secured, circumstances so seemed to work up that he lost the post for no fault of his, and he had once against to embark on a quest of securing some fresh means of livelihood. Thus, for him, continued domestic felicity was not to be, and the sweet pleasures of a home of his own were, for the greater part of the year, denied to him.

Circumstances like these would have unnerved and turned any man of a lesser calibre into a sour pressimist and a rank cynic; but with Vittal Rao the effect was exactly opposite. Adversity, on the other hand, tended to make him all the more optimistic and buoyant. He looked at it

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as if fates had held forth a challenge to him and he, a born fighter, took up the challenge fearlessly and entered the fray. It woke up in him all the spirit of recklessness so long latent, and he was all equal for the bout. With his keen sense of humour he looked on life as but a huge joke and this true evaluation never let him go under.

Wherever he was employed, Vittal Rao was liked both by his superior officers and by his subordinates and workmen. He took an especial interest in the underdog and his superiors found in him a very efficient and pains-taking hand.

He spent about two months in Madras after his return from Gulbarga. He accepted now an offer as Spinning Master in a mill at Gadag. He worked at Gadag for about a year. On one occasion he had to visit Hubli and this visit gave him an opportunity to have the *darshan* of Sri Siddharuda Swami of Hubli. A drama entitled "Manovijaya" was enacted under the direct patronage of the revered saint. It was an allegorical play which showed how Viveka (discrimination), though unsuccessful in the beginning, conquered and triumphed over the adverse evil forces in the end. This drama left a deep impression on Vittal Rao's mind and he still recalls very vividly the grand finale of this religious play.

The Manager of the mill where Vittal Rao worked would often leave the town entrusting the management to the Spinning Master. On one such occasion a certain disciplinary measure that Vittal Rao was compelled to take against one of the workers was grossly misconstrued by them. They conspired together to waylay Vittal Rao

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and assault him, as he left the mill in the evening. Some of the assistants coming to know of the plot hastened to warn Vittal Rao of the evil design and importuned him not to leave the mill premises by the front gate. But no heed was paid to the warnings and, when the mill closed for the day, Vittal Rao, as usual, with only an umbrella in his hand walked out towards the gate. About twenty five men were at the gate with stout sticks in their hands lying in wait for him. Vittal Rao calmly and smilingly surveyed the group for a moment and walked on absolutely unruffled. His smiling face and utter disregard for life evidently disarmed and unnerved the workmen and they dared not carry out their wicked intention.

When Vittal Rao had spent about a year at Gadag, he received an offer from one of the mills at Quilon in Travancore State. The prospects there looked rosy and tempting. He closed in with the offer and resigned his service at Gadag. Here, at Quilon, he served as a Spinning Master of the mill and was later promoted to be its Manager. His wife Rukma Bai also joined him here.

But the old Dame was at her sly tricks again! During his stay at Quilon, Vittal Rao hardly got, in any one month, the full salary agreed to be paid to him. The mill itself was tottering for want of finances. The mill premises was a garden with a large number of cocoanut palms. From time to time, the cocoanuts from the garden were sold and the proceeds utilised towards the payment of salaries of the Manager and his subordinates! Very soon Vittal Rao was forced to close down his house and send his wife back to Mangalore, as it was difficult to get enough even to run his establishment.

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One Sunday, when Vittal Rao was all alone in the mill office, a fitter in the mechanical workshop, tall and stout, came and stood at the entrance of the office with a big unsheathed knife in his hand. The poor fellow had not received his wages for some months and had become desperate. He demanded payment of his wages then and there and threatened Vittal Rao that unless they were paid to him forthwith he would not let him leave the office without peril to his life. At this challenge Vittal Rao told the fitter that no amount of threats would frighten him and further assured him that he was quite prepared to fight his way out. So saying, he got up from his chair, and seizing a heavy rosewood ruler from the table, stepped towards the door brandishing it before him. This was something for which the workman was ill prepared. Seeing the grim determination in his Manager's face, he got thoroughly frightened and instantly took to his heels. He was a bully and all bullies are cowards at heart. This incident and the one that happened at Gadag are but a couple of the many dangerous situations that Vittal Rao had to face in his life and they revealed his unflinching courage and utter fearlessness of death.

He spent eight months in all at Quilon. He was now left with no other choice but to quit the thankless job which had brought him neither work nor recompense. But, before starting afresh in his search of employment, Vittal Rao decided to spend some time with his parents at Hosdrug.

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13

BIRTH OF DAUGHTER

> I have a good reason to be content, for thank God I can read and perhaps understand Shakespeare to his depth.
>
> —*John Keats*

Vittal Rao stayed at Hosdrug for four months on this occasion. He felt a deep interest in astrology and for some time devoted himself to the study of books on the subject. He gained a rudimentary knowledge of the science but soon gave up further pursuit of this interesting study.

He once again took to reading the works of his favourite dramatist, Shakespeare. In the afternoons he would read and translate Shakespeare's dramas to his father in Konkani. Santhappayya, an old Vakil of the place and friend of his father, would also attend the reading. Vittal Rao's manner of translating the dramas was so vivid and realistic that when pathetic passages from the tragedies like King Lear or Othello were read, his auditors would actually be moved to tears. Santhappayya, for one, was so bewitched by Vittal Rao's translation of Shakespeare, that he was unfailingly regular in his attendance. If, on any day, Vittal Rao should be engaged with some other book, the old gentleman would

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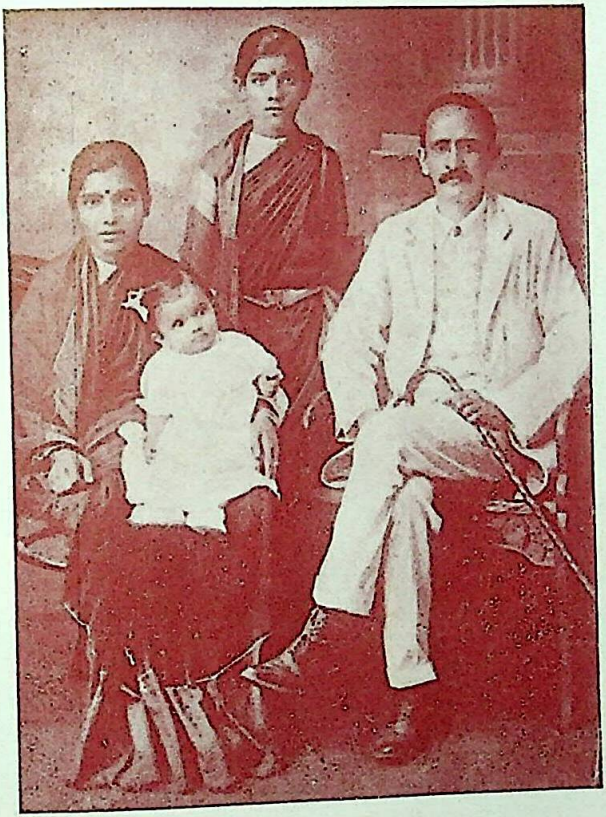

Vittal Rao with his wife and child and sister-in-law

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actually beg of Vittal Rao to read for him a little at least from Shakespeare.

Vittal Rao next proceeded to Bombay in search of service but his efforts met with little success. He then went to Hubli but with no better results. During his stay at Hubli, his friend Chandragiri Shiva Rao, took him to the Arudha Math and Vittal Rao had for the second time the *darshan* of the great saint, Sri Siddharuda Swami.

Sometime later, through the good offices of Dhareshwar Sadashiva Rao, the donor of the scholarship at the V.J.T. Institute, Vittal Rao got an appointment in a Waste Mill at Madras owned by one Mohideen Pichai Saheb. Vittal Rao served in this mill for two years. Here also the same old story repeated itself. Vittal Rao never got his salary in full, and repeated pressure on the proprietor failed to bring forth even half of it. Whenever pressed for the salary, the pious Saheb would say, "Brother, God will give; God will give." But God hardly gave!

In May 1913 Vittal Rao's wife Rukma Bai gave birth to a girl in the local Maternity Hospital. The child was named Ramabai.

Ramabai grew up into a girl and, in due course of time, she became the writer's wife; and, as the above lines were first written, she was by his side watching and helping him in the work.

The reader will pardon the writer if he should digress here a little to say a few words about Ramabai.

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Ramabai was, from her childhood, a vivacious and remarkably intelligent girl. She had in a large measure inherited from her great father, among other gifts, a great love for English literature, a facile pen, a highly-philosophic turn of mind, a keen sense of humour and an ever cheerful outlook on life. From her sixteenth year onwards, she was contributing short stories, humorous skits and poems to various English journals in India. She was also a frequent contributor to the Vision published from Anandashram. At the age of twenty two she published her book entitled "Victory of Faith and Other Stories" which had a very good reception in the Press.

She was one of the earliest "disciples" of Swami Ramdas, whom, from a very young age, she looked upon not in the worldly relationship as her "Papa" but as the very embodiment and personification of Divinity. Deeply religious and devotional by temperament, Ramabai had made an intensive study of the works of some of the Indian Saints. Although she was ailing for nearly five years prior to her demise, she bore her long illness with wonderful patience and cheerfulness, treating it almost as a big joke. A life so full of promise was cut short by her untimely death in October 1952. Remembering her "Papa" till her last conscious moment, and with his picture by her side, Ramabai bade farewell to this world in her thirty-ninth year.

Pichai Saheb's God was evidently not in a mood to pour out money and this made it increasingly difficult for Vittal Rao to continue further in the old gentleman's service. He soon succeeded in getting an appointment in

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the Coimbatore Spinning Mills as a Spinning Master and thither he moved with his wife and child.

Vittal Rao had always a soft corner for his subordinates, especially the mill-hands. Whenever an occasion arose, he doughtily championed their cause, and although the mill-hands held him in great regard, that very reason made him unpopular in the eyes of the European management of the mill where he served, and incurred for him their displeasure.

In 1914, when Vittal Rao was at Coimbatore, there came the sad tidings of the passing away of his mother. She was ailing and almost bed-ridden for several years past. For some time Vittal Rao felt very deeply the loss of his dear mother. He hastened to Hosdrug to join his other brothers in performing the funeral rites of the departed one. All his other brothers were also there, and it was a unique though sad occasion in the family when all the ten brothers and one of the sisters met together, probably for the first and the last time.

When Vittal Rao returned to Coimbatore, a change in the management of the mill was in the air. Scenting the possibility of being asked to quit his service, Vittal Rao sent away his wife and child in advance to Mangalore. His premonitions proved too true, and when the new management took over charge of the mill they served him with a notice terminating his services. Vittal Rao came to Hosdrug and stayed for a month before proceeding to Bombay.

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14

FURTHER VICISSITUDES

This life is all chequer'd with pleasures and woes.
—*Thomas Moore*

Soon after his arrival in Bombay, Vittal Rao received an invitation from K. D. Nerurkar, his old friend at the Victoria Institute, to go over to Ahmedabad. Nerurkar was now employed as an Electrical Engineer at Ahmedabad. After an intense effort for about a month, Vittal Rao secured an appointment as Spinning Master in a mill owned by two Bania brothers.

The salary of his new office was low and petty but his work was arduous. It consisted chiefly of erecting heavy machinery of the mill. From early morn till late at night Vittal Rao had to work at the fitting up of the machines, and most of the evenings he would return home quite exhausted. He was staying with his friend Nerurkar and his wife, both of whom were very hospitable to him. One day, Vittal Rao had such heavy work to do at the mill that he returned to his friend's house in the evening utterly fatigued — every inch of his body aching with intense pain. Directly he reached the house, he laid himself down in the parlour and began to roll on the ground unable to bear the excruciating pain. Seeing his friend's plight Nerurkar gave him an oil massage

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and a warm bath. This gave Vittal Rao great relief for the night and he attended his mill, as usual, the next day.

Now came to Vittal Rao an offer from Nadiad to work in a mill there. The salary was good but the contract was only a period of four months. Here the mill was owned and managed by an old man, over eighty years in age. The owner was so weak that he had to be carried from place to place on a coir cot. But his tongue was both strong and violent. The old proprietor was a past-master in the use of the choicest billingsgate and his command over all the terms of abuse was remarkably complete. There was no clerk or workman in the factory who had not been lashed by his scorpion tongue. Vittal Rao was duly fore-warned by these employees of their old master's weakness for indulging in abuse. Whenever Vittal Rao was called to his side by the owner for any consultation, Vittal Rao would, therefore, preface his talk with a stern warning to the old mill-owner not to let loose his tongue and that his violent language would not for a moment be tolerated. These rebuffs from his new Spinning Master were something new to the old gentleman. All the reputation and prestige that he had so long built upon his intemperate tongue seemed to be in jeopardy now! He would rather send away his new employee than put his tongue under leash. So within two months of his entertainment in the mill, the old man paid Vittal Rao the full salary for the contracted term and discharged him.

Vittal Rao returned to Bombay with his family. He sent back his wife and child to Mangalore and stayed behind for a while to see if he could secure employment anywhere in the city.

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15

LAUNCHING ON A BUSINESS CAREER

> The Prayer of faith shall save the sick;
> and the Lord shall raise him up.
>
> —*James V. 15*

Vittal Rao stayed in Bombay for about a couple of months but all his efforts to secure an employment proved futile. That he should have to be in search of the means of livelihood every now and then filled him with disgust. Just then he received an invitation from his father-in-law at Mangalore to join him in the cloth business that he had newly started. So Vittal Rao finally came down to Mangalore, towards the close of 1917, and joined his father-in-law in his business.

But the standard of commercial ethics which ordinarily ruled the business world was something new and strange to Vittal Rao. It went against his grain to stoop to any of the "tricks of the trade" by which alone, according to the belief prevailing in the commercial world, one could attain any degree of success in business. The standard of his conception was something higher and nobler than the one which circumstances now forced him to conform to. He loved to be straight and square in all his dealings and hated the very idea of lending

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himself to subterfuges and chicanery. Inevitably this led to a clash between the father-in-law and the son-in-law and Vittal Rao soon severed his connection with the business.

Vittal Rao now started on a small scale the work of dyeing and printing sarees. In a small room he conducted all his experiments in dyeing and printing fabrics. About this time his wife was laid up with a severe attack of small-pox and his daughter Ramabai with whooping cough. Vittal Rao kept vigil at the bedside of the patients day and night. After a time, Ramabai recovered from her illness, but Rukma Bai's condition grew worse and worse, day by day, until one day her very life was despaired of. Sorely tried by intense worry and anxiety, Vittal Rao approached the picture of Sri Pandurang-ashram Swamiji of Chitrapur Math hanging in his room and prayed deep and long for the recovery of the patient. As he knelt down before the picture of the Swamiji, burning tears flowed down his cheeks. As he prayed, a sort of calm and peace stole over his agonised mind, and from this moment onwards Rukma Bai began to improve rapidly, and was, before long, her normal self again.

This experience wrought an important change in Vittal Rao's attitude towards life. A sort of dispassion for earthly objects seized him. He would talk to everybody only of God and of the teachings of saints; and he would freely pour out his heart, especially to his elder brother Sitaram Rao, who was then the Chief Sanitary Inspector of the Mangalore Municipality, and to his friend Dr. Umanath Rao, both of whom were religiously inclined

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and between whom and Vittal Rao there always existed a sympathetic understanding.

Almost every night he would repair to his brother's house, taking along with him his little daughter Ramabai, to attend the *bhajan* held there and, after *bhajan,* interesting discussion would take place between the two brothers, sometimes far into the night, on a variety of philosophical topics.

This zest for religion and sense of dispassion waned away for a time during the period of business activities but only to revive with added intensity and force at a later stage.

The work of dyeing fabrics and printing sarees which Vittal Rao had started on a small scale soon widened in its scope and he found it necessary to move to bigger premises and also to open a shop in the town to book orders and transact business. He received considerable encouragement and help in the enterprise from his brother Sitaram Rao. A large house was rented at Falnir to serve the dual purposes of residential quarters and a workshop. A shop was also opened near the Milagres Church and the new business was styled "Sri Sitaram Vittal Co."

Vittal Rao now invited his co-brother Chandragiri Narsing Rao, who was in service in Bombay, to join in the new business as a partner, and both of them shifted to the new quarters with their families towards the middle of 1919.

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16

SRI SITARAM VITTAL CO.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them as we will.

—*Shakespeare*

The newly opened business was conducted on a pretty large scale both in dyed and printed sarees and in the sale of dyes. Vittal Rao attended to the workshop at home while Narsing Rao attended to the shop in the town. Later, Vittal Rao's eldest brother Narsing Rao also joined the business as a partner.

Vittal Rao put his heart and soul into the work and would personally lead his workmen in carrying out the different processes of dyeing fabrics. It was a familiar sight in those days to see Vittal Rao with his shirt and dhoti besplashed with all sorts of colours. The products of Sri Sitaram Vittal Co. were highly appreciated by the public and they even won a gold medal at one of the exhibitions held at Mangalore.

But Vittal Rao was too good to be a business man. The wages that he paid his workmen were higher than what similar work would have earned for them elsewhere. Increments to the staff were frequent and were fixed without any thought of the financial condition of

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the Company. The scales started tilting dangerously towards the debit side. The expenses became heavy and whatever be the profits, they were swallowed up by the day-to-day expenses of the upkeep. There was no capital to back up the concern; still less any reserve funds to fall back upon in times of emergency. The Company was rushing headlong to disaster. In course of time, his two partners also left the business, one after the other, as the state of affairs was neither bright nor helpful. Such a condition would have well nigh crushed any one, but it left Vittal Rao as irreppressible as ever. About this time, most enthusiastically he worked at a scheme to establish a power-loom factory, as a joint stock concern, at Mangalore. He took great pains to collect all the necessary statistics and data, and even the Articles of Association were drawn up, but the scheme fell through for lack of sufficient encouragement and response from the local capitalists.

The writer had at this time the good fortune to stay with Vittal Rao for his college course and had therefore the privilege and opportunity to come into close and intimate contact with him. The nights especially — the only time when Vittal Rao relaxed a little from his arduous duties of the day — he would devote to reading light or serious literature. Vittal Rao would be in his element, especially, when there was his brother Sitaram Rao, or his friend, Dr. Umanath Rao, in his company; and then their talks would often prolong into late hours. Some times, his father too would join his sons' company and there would be no end to the gaiety of the moment.

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For us, youngsters, these talks were a rare treat. The discussions would be of absorbing interest and cover a wide field from the sacred to the profane. Politics was the talk of the day. Mahatma Gandhi had just then assumed the reins of the Congress and his Non-co-operation movement had overnight, as it were, galvanized the political life of India. His message of charka and khaddar eshoed and re-echoed throughout the length and breadth of Hindusthan. Vittal Rao, like his brother Sitaram Rao and his friend Dr. Umanath Rao, was an ardent nationalist. He became a great admirer of Gandhiji and took to wearing khaddar.

Sometimes, the discussions would turn upon such learned subjects as the tragedies of Shakespeare or the works of poets like Milton, Byron, Keats and Shelley. In all these discussions Vittal Rao was quite at home, and could hold his own against any other scholar. Often the talks would assume a lighter vein and one would come across rare flashes of wit and humour. Sometimes he would narrate an anecdote or a story, be it from some humorous writer like W. W. Jacobs or from his own life, but the manner of narration was so provokingly funny and unique that the house would resound with peals of laughter from his listeners.

Occasionally, his cousin, Mark Sanjiva Rao, would drop in for a friendly chat. Sanjiva Rao, who was a convert to the Christian faith and a sincere and zealous missionary at that, would try his best to impress Vittal Rao with the superiority of his own faith. But Vittal Rao, always eager for an intellectual bout, would vehe-

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mently argue for the other side and the discussion would at times drag on for hours; and, in the end, they would part just as good friends as ever, but each unconvinced of the other's point of view, as at the start of their discussion, and no wiser either!

No one who saw or heard Vittal Rao in those carefree and ebullient moods could scarce have guessed that there, under all this boyish cheerfulness and laughter, ran a streak of genuine anxiety for the business. The secret of it was that even in those days Vittal Rao had the great gift of looking at things with a detached spirit, and shaking off for the time being all the cares and worries, as if they were never meant for him. His motto appeared to be to live in the living present and let God take care of the morrow.

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17

PROVIDENCE TO THE RESCUE

Cast thy burden on the Lord and He shall sustain thee.

—Holy Bible

On the one hand the financial condition of the business concern was drifting from bad to worse. On the other, Vittal Rao's domestic life was none too happy. His wife Rukma Bai had become a chronic asthmatic patient and was now almost an invalid. As observed in an earlier chapter, she was a strong-willed lady with an orthodox outlook, while her husband was modern in the sense that he refused to subscribe or submit to the superannuated notions of religion and religious life and the abounding bigotry and superstition with which they were surrounded. He was severe and outspoken in his condemnation of orthodoxy — especially its archaic ritualism — and he had little patience with the pampered priestly order who fostered it. Although her love and respect for her husband would ultimately make Rukma Bai yield to her husband's view-point, it was not without a painful clash between them.

Vittal Rao was very much attached to his only child, Ramabai, then seven years old, as much as she was to him. He centred all his love and affection on his

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daughter. He would take her to school every morning and escort her back in the afternoons. He would join her in her games and patiently answer all the questions that childish fancy or curiosity prompted her to put to him, and she would be his constant companion during his leisure hours. Yet, very soon, a time was to come when this excessive love for his only child was to be wiped out completely by the universal vision that he attained, and his child was to be to him in no sense different from the other children that came to him.

But slowly and imperceptibly the external circumstances were helping Vittal Rao's religious inclination to become deeper and his spirit of dispassion to gain an added strength and impetus. Every evening he spent an hour at the house of his brother Sitaram Rao, whose children would be engaged in *bhajan* before the image of Sri Krishna. During the *bhajan* Vittal Rao would lose himself in a blissful state of self-forgetfulness. He now commenced reading afresh the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and the works of Swami Vivekananda and Swami Rama Tirtha and other religious books like the *Yogavashista* with an intense interest. These works seemed now to unveil to him a deeper meaning and significance than they ever did before and accelerated the speed of the spiritual evolution that was subtly taking place in him.

It was at this time that Vittal Rao started chanting the Lord's name of "Ram" and the repetition of the name brought him great mental peace and joy. He kept up a ceaseless flow of the blessed name on his tongue

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and its humming sound would automatically issue from his lips even when he was at work or was walking in the streets.

The affairs of Sri Sitaram Vittal Co. were plunging deeper and deeper into a quagmire of financial liabilities. Creditors all round were pressing Vittal Rao for a settlement of their dues. It seemed only Providence could rescue him from the impending crash and disaster.

But the Lord's mercy is proverbial and it works in a mysterious manner "His wonders to perform." Has not the Lord held forth the Divine assurance in the *Gita:*

> To those men who worship Me alone thinking of no other,
> to those ever harmonious, I bring full security;

and, have we not read of the innumerable instances in the lives of our great saints, sages and saviours how repeatedly He ran to the succour of his devotees in distress? Even so, He came to Vittal Rao's rescue in a most wonderful way, at a time when everything was past all hope and only a miracle could stave off the utter ruin.

One day, a gentleman came to see Vittal Rao at his house where he was carrying on his dyeing work. This gentleman was a well-to-do lawyer of Mangalore and had only recently given up his practice at the Bar in answer to Mahatmaji's call to boycott the Law Courts. He took a sudden liking for Vittal Rao, and before their talk had proceeded far, he offered to join him as a partner in his business. Vittal Rao placed before him a true and complete picture of the Company's state of affairs and frankly told him that to join the business at this

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juncture was tantamount to sharing the deep hole that he himself was now in. But the friend was not to be dissuaded and he made immediate arrangements to become a partner in the firm. Besides liquidating all the Company's liabilities, he invested a pretty big sum in erecting forty handlooms for the manufacture of khaddar. Later on, he erected a shed also to house these looms. From the time he came in as a partner he was looking after the business at the shop and Vittal Rao was managing the handloom establishment.

But for Vittal Rao things were moving rather fast. Although his new partner was all kindness and saw to it that Vittal Rao's household did not lack in anything, Vittal Rao's mind was from day to day running fast in the direction of God. The Lord's name was continuously working on his tongue. He gave up the night meal and other petty comforts of the body. His *sadhana* evoked remonstrance all around. He started spending the greater part of the nights in the repetition of the name. His wife, Rukma Bai, got thoroughly frightened at the strange turn her husband's life was rapidly taking now. No persuasion, appeal and protest either from her or from his child could induce him to alter the course he was now made to follow. Because he felt very strongly that he was set upon this path by that Highest Power which he was struggling to attain and realize.

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18

THE STRUGGLE AND INITIATION

I plunged into the depthless sea of life
And came by the rarest gem — Thy Name.

—*Swami Ramdas*

This critical period in Vittal Rao's life and the psychological struggle he was now undergoing have been so beautifully and graphically described by him in his later great work, "In Quest of God", that the writer seeks no excuse to quote here extensively from the first chapter of that book.

This is what Swami Ramdas, as he has been known ever since, says in his own inimitable way concerning this period of his life: "It was a period of terrible stress and restlessness, all of his own making. In this utterly helpless condition, full of misery, 'Where was relief? Where was rest?' This was the heart's cry of Ramdas. The cry was heard, and from the Great Void came the voice, 'Despair not! Trust Me and thou shalt be free!' and this was the voice of Ram. These encouraging words of Ram proved like a plank thrown towards a man struggling for very life in the stormy waves of a raging sea. The great assurance soothed the aching heart of helpless Ramdas, like gentle rain on thirsting earth.

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"Thence-forward, a part of the time that was formerly totally devoted to worldly affairs was taken up for the meditation of Ram, who for that period, gave Ramdas real peace and relief. Gradually, love for Ram — the Giver of Peace — increased. The more Ramdas meditated on and uttered His name the greater relief and pleasure he felt. Nights, free as they are from worldly duties, were in course of time, utilised for *Rambhajan* with scarcely one or two hours' rest.

"Ramdas' devotion for Ram progressed by leaps and bounds..... Whenever free from worldly duties — for even so small a period — Ramdas would meditate on and utter the name of Ram. Walking in the streets he would be uttering, 'Ram, Ram'.

"Ramdas was now losing attraction for the objects of the world. Sleep, except for one or two hours in the night, was given up for the sake of Ram. Fineries in clothes and dress were replaced by coarse khaddar. Beds, substituted by a bare mat. Food, first two meals reduced to one meal a day and after sometime this too was given up for plantains and boiled potatoes — chillies and salt were totally eschewed. No taste but for Ram; meditation of Ram continued apace. It encroached upon the hours of the day and the so-called worldly duties.

"At this stage, one day, Ramdas' father came to him, sent by Ram, and calling him aside, gave him the upadesh of Ram Mantram — 'Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram!' assuring Ramdas that by repeating this *mantram* at all times, Ram would give him eternal happiness. This initiation from the father — who has thereafter

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been looked upon as *Gurudev* — hastened on the aspirant in his spiritual progress.

"Off and on Ramdas was prompted by Ram to read the teachings of Sri Krishna—*The Bhagavad Gita,* Jesus Christ—*The New Testament,* Mahatma Gandhi—*Young India* and Ethical Religion. The young plant of *Bhakti* in Ram was thus nurtured in the electric atmosphere created by the influence of these great men on the mind of humble Ramdas. It was at this time that it slowly dawned upon the mind of Ramdas that Ram was the only Reality and all else was false. Whilst desire for the enjoyment of worldly things was fast falling off — the consideration of *me* and *mine* was also wearing out. The sense of possession and relationship was vanishing. All thought, all mind, all heart, all soul was being concentrated on Ram — Ram covering up and absorbing everything."

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19

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

There is no other way to life but the way of Cross.

—*Holy Bible*

It would be worthwhile for us to take a peep into the rigorous life of *sadhana* that Vittal Rao led now. As days passed by, his life became more and more severely simple and ascetic. He had already discarded the use of his coat, and his apparel now consisted of a piece of dhoti, four cubits long, carelessly wound round his body, a loose, collarless shirt and a white cap — all made of coarse hand-spun khaddar. On account of the severe reduction and change in his diet, he had grown very pale and lean. He walked in the streets with his eyes straight ahead and distant-looking. If any friend or relation met him on the road, the former had to stop him to talk to. But Vittal Rao talked very little and that too only when absolutely necessary. He would just smile and only the slow, sweet and rhythmic humming sound of "Sri Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Jai Ram" would issue from his lips. He would move about his work in an absorbed state of mental ecstasy.

On one occasion, when he was sitting in his room repeating the *Mantra* at night, his brother-in-law, who

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was on very friendly and intimate terms with him, came in with the intention of advising Vittal Rao to give up his strange way of living, as it was causing pain to his dear ones and relations. As he stepped into the room, Vittal Rao sensed the mission on which he had come. With an emphatic determination Vittal Rao told his brother-in-law, "Look here, I shall go on repeating the *Mantra* so incessantly and to such an intense degree as to make these very walls resound with its echo." The friend, who was just opening his mouth to frame the words of his protest, was simply taken aback at Vittal Rao's ringing words. He thought that discretion was better part of valour and, jumping out of the room, disappeared precipitately. Instead of retarding the pace of Vittal Rao's *sadhana,* his brother-in-law's visit only helped to speed it on.

Vittal Rao would get up at four o'clock in the morning, and run to the Kadri Hill. There, in one of the tanks he would have his bath and, after bath, he would go to an elevated rock and sit down for meditation till about seven. He gave up later even his midday meals. He now subsisted entirely on boiled potatoes and other fruits and these too he would eat only when he felt hungry. He had before this given up the use of even his dentures. He bathed in cold water drawn out of the well by himself and washed his own clothes. A bare mat sufficed him for laying himself down but he kept himself awake the whole night in the repetition of the *Mantra.* It may be that Vittal Rao was entirely without sleep consecutively for six months and the Lord's name never left his lips even for a moment during this period.

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The news that Vittal Rao was becoming perfectly unworldly and indifferent to his household affairs soon spread among his relations and caused them no little concern and alarm. One day, his eldest sister, Lakshmi Devi, was induced by some of the relatives to offer some sweets to Vittal Rao. Both Vittal Rao and his eldest sister Lakshmi Devi had grown up together and, between them, there was a strong bond of mutual love and regard. These people were therefore led to think that if she should offer anything to her brother, he would not, out of his regard for her, refuse to comply with her wishes. But Vittal Rao was adamant in his resolve and refused to accept the proffered sweets. Finding all their protests and pleadings of little avail, both Ramabai and her mother Rukma Bai adopted the same course of diet as Vittal Rao followed. Vittal Rao advised them to desist from such a foolish step but they continued to have it for a month or two, when at last they found it necessary to return to the normal food.

Commenting on this period of Vittal Rao's life, his brother Sanjiva Rao writes in the June issue of Vol. III of *The Vision* thus:—

"I used to visit Kanara once every two or three years. During my visits I would stay for a few days with my brothers. During my stay with brother Sitaram Rao in Mangalore I was told that brother Vittal Rao, who had been managing a Weaving Establishment in Mangalore for another gentleman, had developed an intense disgust for the world. I went and saw him. I found him wearing the coarse khaddar and the bench he was sitting on at the time of my visit was strewn with reli-

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gious books, amongst which I remember to have seen the works of Swami Rama Tirtha. In course of my talk with him he told me that he was not going to remain long in Mangalore and that because he was under an obligation to his partner he had to continue there for some time longer. What exactly he intended to do after fulfilling his part of the obligation to his partner, he did not inform me.

"A couple of days after my visit to him, he happened to come one night to brother Sitaram Rao's house along with Dr. Umanath Rao. Mahatma Gandhi became the topic of conversation. There was some discussion about the impracticability of '*Ahimsa*' as preached by the Mahatma. In the course of the conversation brother Vittal Rao remarked: 'These fetters are galling. Why not I snap them?' At once my other brother vehemently met this remark with an exposition of the duties of a householder as he understood them and how it would be cowardice to shirk them, and, so on. This did not convince Vittal Rao. Soon after this discussion Dr. Umanath Rao and himself left. That night, reviewing the conversation, it struck me that brother Vittal Rao was in dead earnest when he declared his intention of 'snapping the bonds' and expressed my fear on this subject to brother Sitaram Rao, who pooh-poohed the whole matter, adding how even when things were considerably less bright, brother Vittal Rao did not think of giving up the world. His assurance did not satisfy me.

"After my return to Ernakulam, I had news from time to time how like a *Sannyasin,* brother Vittal Rao was living, first reducing the meals from two to one and

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latterly giving it up also and living on potatoes. Naturally this self-denial on his part gave great anxiety to his relations — for he was adamant in spite of protests and persuasions from all quarters. At this juncture I had a letter from father in which he asked me to write to brother Vittal Rao and persuade him to break his fast and resume taking two meals. I did, of course, write urging dear father's old age as one of the chief reasons why he should not continue the fast which was causing anxiety all round. My letter brought a prompt but brief reply. It said that since he began the fast he felt, if anything, better than before, and he was trying the fast as an experiment. The letter ended with the statement 'that he had realized the hollowness of this life.' After this I did not pursue the matter further because I knew it was useless."

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20

TOWARDS THE FINAL PLUNGE

'Watchman, What of the night?'
The Watchman said, 'The Morning Cometh.'
—*Holy Bible*

Even in the intense state of detachment (*vairagya*) and *sadhana* described in the last chapter, Vittal Rao was attending to all the duties pertaining to the Weaving establishment with meticulous care. Even so, the vision of universal life was slowly dawning upon him. Consequently, he had become extremely kind, charitable and forgiving towards the workmen serving under him. He freely moved among them and treated them as equals. This equality of treatment meted out to the workers one day evoked a burst of vehement protest from his brother Sitaram Rao but only to be brushed aside with a sweet and gentle smile from Vittal Rao.

He felt a comradeship with all living things and was swept away by compassion for all those who suffered. He also now became highly sensitive to the pain and suffering of others and felt as if he himself was experiencing all the pain and sorrows which others were undergoing.

One evening, as Vittal Rao was passing along the road leading to the Kadri hill, he met a bullock cart. As

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he neared the cart, he found that the cartman was mercilessly beating the bullocks to induce them to go faster. Vittal Rao could not bear the sight. He actually seemed to feel the smarting pain of the blow everytime the cartman heavily laid the lash on the bullock's back. With a loud cry he begged the cartman not to beat the poor, dumb creatures but the cartman heeded not. So, before another blow was dealt to the bullocks, Vittal Rao ran away from the painful sight as fast as he could.

At home he would advise his wife and daughter not to injure or cause any harm to even the tiniest of God's creatures, however disagreeable they be. This paternal advice made such a deep and abiding impression on his daughter Ramabai that she tried to carry out her father's precept literally — all through her life.

An acquaintance of Vittal Rao in the town fell seriously ill about this time. His was an advanced case of tuberculosis, and he was considered to be past all medical aid. Vittal Rao would repair to the house of the ailing friend every evening and spend the night at his bedside, cheering the sick man with his company and ministration. This labour of love he continued to do until the friend breathed his last.

Now and again, Vittal Rao would feel a vague intuition that he was very soon to renounce everything and be altogether God's own. One day, when he had gone to the town to see his partner-friend, Vittal Rao gave expression to this urge to kick up everything and go away somewhere. When the friend heard this — he was all

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these days watching the trend of Vittal Rao's life with considerable anxiety and misgivings — he displayed a frightened look and cried out, "If you go away, you will only be leaving me destitute on the roadside." But this remark of protest left Vittal Rao's mind unaffected because he knew that his life had become a play-thing in the hands of the Almighty to be shaped and moulded as He alone willed.

Slowly the idea of renouncing everything and getting away from his present environs was gathering momentum. He knew not yet what course this step on his part would take and how and when it would finally take shape. All that he knew was that the hour of the supreme call to give up everything that he called his own in this world and make the final plunge into the very infinity would not long be delayed. It was to be a daring leap into the mystic unknown and called for tremendous courage to take it. But it was a leap actuated by the same Great Power as placed the divine *Mantra* on his lips and turned his vision towards It; and Vittal Rao was all ready and eager for the grand adventure when the supreme hour struck — an adventure that meant untold suffering and mortification of the body. In the language of the mystics, it was to be an adventure to storm the very City of God and win its eternal freedom!

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21

CROSSING THE RUBICON

Flee unto Him for shelter with all thy being,
O Bharata; by His grace thou shalt obtain supreme peace, the everlasting dwelling-place.

—Bhagavad Gita, XVIII, 62

It was the zero hour of Vittal Rao's life — the supreme moment towards which his life during these last two years was slowly but inexorably moving itself for ultimate fulfilment. The hour of destiny had at last arrived, when he was to break asunder all the shackles that still bound him to the worldly life and cast himself entirely and absolutely on Divine mercy, in the great venture on which he was to sally forth, in pursuit of the vision of the Life Universal. It was the momentous time when he was to cut himself away from all the moorings that held him to this world and set his tiny boat sailing in the infinite expanse of the Divine ocean, seemingly without a rudder, chart or compass, daring the very storms and tempests that would ceaselessly assail him and try to crush his spirit. But Vittal Rao was fortified in the knowledge that it was the Divine Pilot who was guiding his little boat into the unknown and unchartered seas. Where then was the need for any fear or, where any need for anxiety for him?

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This is how Swamiji describes this critical stage in his life in his "In Quest of God":—

"So, one night while engaged in drinking the sweetness of His name Ramdas was made to think in the following strain: 'O Ram, when Thy slave finds Thee at once so powerful and so loving and he who trusts Thee can be sure of true peace and happiness, why should he not throw himself entirely on Thy mercy which can be possible only by giving up everything he called 'mine'? Thou art all in all to Thy slave. Thou art the sole Protector in the world. Men are deluded when they declare 'I do this — I do that — This is mine — That is mine.' All, O Ram, is Thine, and all things are done by Thee alone. Thy slave's one prayer to Thee is to take him under Thy complete guidance and remove the 'I'-ness in him.'

"This prayer was heard. Ramdas' heart heaved a heavy sigh — a hazy desire to renounce all and wander in the garb of a mendicant — in quest of Ram — wafted over his mind. Now Ram prompted Ramdas to open at random the book, 'Light of Asia' which was before him at the time. His eyes rested upon the pages wherein is described the great renunciation of Buddha, who says:—

'For now the hour is come when I should quit
This golden prison, where my heart lives caged
To find the truth, which henceforth I will seek
For all men's sake, until the truth be found.'

"Then Ramdas similarly opened the 'New Testament' and lighted upon the following definite words of Jesus Christ:—

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'And everyone that hath forsaken houses or brethren, or sisters, or father or mother or wife or children or lands for my name's sake, shall receive a hundred-fold and shall inherit everlasting life'.

"Then again Ramdas was actuated in the same way to refer to the 'Bhagvad Gita'—and he read the following slokas:—

'Abandoning all duties come to Me alone for shelter, sorrow not, I will liberate thee from all sins.'

"Ram had thus spoken out through the words of these three great *Avatars,* — Buddha, Christ and Krishna — all of them pointed to the same path — renunciation. At once Ramdas made up his mind to give up, for the sake of Ram, all that he till then hugged to his bosom as his own, and get out of the *Samsarik* world."

The very Ram to whom he was praying for deliverance from the worldly bondage now conspired with His devotee to make it easier for Vittal Rao to get away from the worldly life. Both his wife and daughter just then happened to be invited to stay for a couple of days at the house of Rukma Bai's father in the town and were away from their home. Seizing this valuable opportunity, Vittal Rao, without anybody's knowledge, purchased a quarter anna worth of red ochre and, coming home, dyed two of his four khaddar clothes, in ochre colour. The same night he wrote two letters, "one to his wife whom Ram had made him look upon for sometime past only as his sister" and another to his friend, his partner in the business.

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The letter addressed to his wife ran thus:—

"Dear Sister,

You are to me only a sister in future. Sri Ram at whose feet I have surrendered myself entirely has called me away from the past sphere of life. I go forth a beggar into the wide world chanting the sweet name of Sri Ram. You know I have no ambition in life except to struggle for the attainment of Sri Ram's grace and love. To that aim alone I dedicate the rest of my life and suffer for it — suffer to any extent. We may not meet again — at least as husband and wife. Walk always in the path of God and Truth, and make Rame do the same.

Don't give up the spinning wheel. It will give you peace and happiness. Let Rame also work it.

Sri Ram's blessings on you and Rame. He protects you both.

Yours affectionately,

27-12-22 P. VITTAL RAO

The above beautiful and touching letter has been published in "Letters of Swami Ramdas," Vol. I. 'Rame', referred to in the above letter, was the pet name of his daughter Ramabai.

It may be mentioned here, that, true to her husband's parting behest, Rukma Bai made the spinning wheel her constant companion and source of her com-

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fort, peace and happiness, almost till her last day on this earth.

To quote Swamiji's words once again, "the resolution was made. At 5 o'clock in the morning Ramdas bade farewell to a world for which he had lost all attraction — in which he could find nothing to call his own. The body, the mind, the soul — all laid at the feet of Ram, that Eternal Being full of love and full of mercy."

Thus, on 27th December 1922, in his 38th year, Vittal Rao turned his back to the worldly life to which he was never more to return.

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22

REBIRTH INTO DIVINITY

Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts shall find no rest save in Thee.

—*St. Paul*

Vittal Rao boarded the Madras Mail, as it was then called, at 5 a.m. and got down at Erode junction in the evening. All the worldly wealth that he now carried with him was Rs. 25 in addition to a couple of clothes dyed in red ochre and a few books including the *Bhagavad Gita,* the *Light of Asia* and the *New Testament.*

At Erode Vittal Rao found himself strangely helpless without any plan or thought for the future. He knew not where the Divine Will was leading him, nor why It made him alight at Erode Station of all the places. He wandered in the town for a while and, as darkness set in, he approached a hut by the wayside, and finding a middle-aged woman at the entrance, begged her to give him some food. The kind-hearted woman gladly welcomed him in and served him with some rice and curds, but with great difficulty could she be induced to accept any money for the food she served.

Vittal Rao returned to the station and took rest, laying himself down in a corner. All the time, all the way

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from Mangalore, the Divine *Mantra* was on his lips. About midnight, a bell rang announcing the arrival of a train. Vittal Rao got up and found himself accosted by a Tamilian, who asked him where he was going. But Vittal Rao himself did not know what reply to give. The Tamilian, however, proposed that he would take him to Trichinopoly, to which place he himself was bound. Out of the money provided by Vittal Rao, he purchased a ticket for him for Trichinopoly and both got into the train waiting at the platform.

The train reached Trichinopoly towards the evening and Vittal Rao immediately proceeded into the city. Taking rest for the night on the verandah of a house by the roadside, Vittal Rao started on foot to Srirangam early the next morning. Srirangam is only seven miles from Trichinopoly and he reached the town by 8 o'clock. To continue here the telling description given by Swamiji himself in "In Quest of God": "Here Ramdas was first let into the secret of Ram's purpose in drawing him out from the sphere of his former life and surroundings—and that purpose was to take Ramdas on a pilgrimage to sacred shrines and holy rivers. At Srirangam the beautiful river Kaveri was flowing in all her purity and majesty. Going up to it Ramdas bathed in the clear waters of the river. Here on the banks of Kaveri — Ramdas assumed by Ram's command, the robe of a *Sannyasin*. It was a momentous step by taking which Ram gave Ramdas an entirely new birth. The white clothes previously worn by Ramdas were offered up to the river Kaveri — who carried them away in her rushing waters. The gerrua or orange-coloured clothes were put on and

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the following prayer went up to the feet of Almighty Ram:—

'O Ram — O Love, Infinite-Protector of all the worlds. It is by Thy wish alone Thy humble slave is induced to adopt *Sannyas*. In Thy name alone, O Ram, he has given up the *Samsara*— all bonds, all ties have been cut asunder. O Ram, bless Thy poor devotee with Thy grace. May Ramdas be endued with strength and courage and faith to carry out in Thy name — Ram. — the following vows and bear all trials and all kinds of sorrows that may beset the path of a *Sannyasin* — in his passage through the rough and perilous life of a mendicant:—

'1. This life henceforth be entirely consecrated to meditation and the service of Sri Ram.

2. Strict celibacy be observed, looking upon all women as mothers.

3. The body be maintained and fed upon the food procured by *Bhiksha* or on what was offered as alms.'

Here it was on this momentous occasion that he, as commanded by Ram, assumed the name of "Ramdas", meaning the "servant of the Lord", to signify the new birth and the new life he had entered upon.

This is how Swamiji further ecstatically describes his spiritual rebirth:—"The thrills of a new birth, a new life, filled with the sweet love of Ram were felt. A peace

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came upon the struggling soul of Ramdas. The turmoil ceased. Ram's own hands seemed to have touched the head of his slave, — Ram blessed. O tears, flow on, for the mere joy of a deliverance! Sorrow, pain, anxiety and care — all vanished — never to return. All glory be to Thee — Ram. The great blessings came from Ram: 'I take thee under My guidance and protection — remain ever My devotee — thy name shall be Ramdas'. Yes, Ramdas, what a grand privilege it is to become the *das* of Ram who is all love — all kindness — all mercy — all forgiveness!"

Yea, it was truly a glorious rebirth — a new life in its entirety—a life of utter and absolute dedication to the Lord that was soon to lead the spiritual infant on to the attainment of the radiant and transcendent oneness with Divinity. Elsewhere, in joyous strains Swamiji sings:—

"God-Thought seized me and made me divine
With this new light and joy
I roamed on this earth like one distraught"

and, yet again:—

"For my life burns like a flame
At the shrine of my Lord.
It enters into His being
Still a worshipper at His feet.
My Lord I found within —
My heart His temple of light.
He is my Master, my Mother
I am His slave, His child."

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23

SWAMI RAMDAS
— A GLIMPSE INTO HIS EARLY LIFE —

By P. Ramanand

(1947)

Twenty-five years ago, my uncle Vittal Rao suddenly renounced the world and left Mangalore for an unknown destination, leaving behind him his wife and child. This bewildered me not a little, for I had grown very fond of his family, and I became sore in my heart for my helpless aunt and my little cousin. His renunciation reminded me of the other Great Renunciation, 2500 years ago, of Prince Siddhartha. He too had left behind him a wife and a child, and had walked the rough and thorny path alone. I envisaged in my mind all the terrors of this dreadful path — all the tribulations and agonies of body and soul, the harrowing trials and hardships, the rigorous self-discipline and relentless mortifications of the flesh, and the enormous cruelties and indignities which unthinking man heaps on those who choose this path. All these must have been the lot of the Great Prince, and, undoubtedly, would be the lot of my uncle also in his quest of the Eternal. But Prince Siddhartha had triumphed over all tribulations and had returned to the world as the Enlightened One. Would my uncle also do as He did, and return to us as one of the Shining Ones of the world?

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Or — dread thought — would he come back to us like so many people of puny stature, who, in a fit of cussedness leave their hearths and homes and take to the *gerrua* cloth, but, after a time, unable to bear the rigours of this fearful path, sneak back into the world and creep into our lives humbled and crestfallen, the very shadows of their former selves? It was indeed a dread and disturbing thought to me.

But not for long. For, more than 35 years ago, it had been given to me to sense a future greatness for him. But it was hardly the greatness which is his now!

I was a stripling then studying in the High School classes at Mangalore. My uncle was then having a chequered life at various places — Quilon, Coimbatore, Madras, Gadag, etc. In between his one job and another he used to come to Mangalore and stay with his father-in-law, sometimes for pretty long periods. And when he did so, I had the happiest days of my adolescence! I would cast aside all my legitimate studies and even games, and barely keeping to my attendance in class, I would snatch every opportunity to go to him and remain at his feet and listen to his magic words and discourses — *not* on Religion, but on Literature, and English Literature at that! While all the other grown-ups about me were spending their leisure hours in devouring Charles Garvice, Guy Boothby, William Le Queux and other penny dreadfuls, as if their very lives depended upon their doing so, here was an uncle, not even a Matriculate, opening up to me the magic casements of English literature one after another, with a fervour and a passion that

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later on in my collegiate studies, I failed to detect even in Professors of English! And some of these were Englishmen too!

One day he would discourse to me on the charm of Lamb's "Essays of Elia", the next day he would show to me the power and strength of Byron's verse in his "Childe Harold" or his bitter sarcasm in his "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers". The third day he would bring to me the glory and grandeur of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" or the sombre magnificence of his "Sonnets". The fourth day he would introduce to me the gall and bitterness in the "Letters of Junius" or the innocence and loveliness in the "Letters of Cowper". The fifth day he would discourse to me on Johnson and his circle of friends — Boswell, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Garrick, Reynolds, Burke, etc. — with a special bias towards poor Goldsmith, or read to me Ben Johnson's "The Alchemist". The sixth day he would invite me to be one of the homely company in Burn's "A Cottar's Saturday Night" or help me to make friends with the delightful Sir Roger de Coverley of Addison and Steele. On the seventh day he would bring out to me the fire from Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" or let loose the flood of laughter from the stories of W. W. Jacobs and Jerome K. Jerome. And so on and on, according to the mood of the hour. And this went on during all those intermittent periods of his stay at Mangalore! No Master of English, great or small, was ever neglected. Poets and dramatists, essayists and story-writers, letter-writers and reviewers, humorists and satirists were all paraded by him before me, in all their greatness or littleness, and

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made to live again before me in flesh and blood. And all the while I was only a High School lad! It was a wild, mad living in literature for both of us, and nothing else seemed to have any importance for either of us. For, had he not created for me and for himself an entirely new world, far more fascinating than the world around us, and peopled with such literary giants and fascinating figures like Shakespeare and Ben Johnson, Marlowe and Milton, Dryden and Pope, Addison and Steele, Keats and Shelley, Byron and Burns, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Johnson and Boswell, Cowper and Goldsmith, Garrick and Sheridan, and Fox and Burke—not to mention W. W. Jacobs and Jerome K. Jerome? Who would not revel in such a fascinating world, and who would want any others?

But far more fascinating to me than all this was my uncle himself! His glowing discourses on these literary giants and their spacious times, his irrepressible wit and humour, the vividness of his thoughts and feelings, the fervid words with which he gave shape to them, his wonderful gift of telling a story and the marvellous facility and flow of his language, all these made me look upon him, in relation to the other grown-ups about me, as something of a superman, and created between himself and the adolescent me a far stronger bond than one of mere affection between an uncle and a nephew. In fact he had become to me in no time a Pied Piper of Hamelin — a Piper, who, I was certain, had fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of paradise.

I confess I have absolutely no idea as to how my uncle appeared then to my other relatives and friends.

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That one literary aspect of his life, coupled with his ever bubbling humour, was the only aspect I knew, and that aspect had been all in all to me concerning him. I never bothered to find out the other sides of my uncle. Even at this distance of time, when I think of my Vittu bappa — as I used to call him then, "Vittu' being shortened form of 'Vittal' and 'bappa' meaning 'uncle' in Konkani — it is only the picture of a fervid young man fired with an intense literary zeal and ever bubbling with humour and laughter that stands before me like a big grown-up child than a man of the world. 'A perfectly guileless person' would probably hit off the mark. He was so simple in his dress and manners that it was a standing joke among us that he did not even know how to wear a dhoti properly. That he would not know even if a portion of him was sliced off, was another tag with which we used to rag him. And then, alas, that remarkable faculty of absent-mindedness, with which our family as a whole seems to have been gifted, undoubtedly reached its peak in him and involved him in many a domestic disaster of the minor sort. And then also, I remember, the Stage had its fascination for him and made him to produce a number of amateur plays in his younger days, and in these plays he was not only the producer and an actor but the dress-maker, curtain-painter and scene-shifter as well! Even later on, I remember his beautiful production of the Marathi play "Santha Damaji" in Mangalore and his magnificent acting as a Mussalman General in it. He had drafted most of us to act in this production, and I remember also how I barely escaped with the skin of my teeth from wearing a blouse and *saree* in it! And then also, I cannot forget

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that incident in which he figured as a hero — of the Wodehousian type. He was, like most of the members of our family, a very heavy sleeper in those days, not getting up usually before nine or ten in the morning! One day one of his younger brothers — my Shina bappa, in fact (the late Shri Srinivasa Rao, Artist and Photographer at Udipi) — was asked to wake him up and he did — with disastrous results to himself. My Vittu bappa was wild and furious at being awakened an hour earlier than his usual time and he chased the culprit out of the house, mad with fury. Round and round the house the two brothers ran — the scene was in the best Wodehousian manner — until at last the gasping younger brother made a successful get-away. And the elder, my Vittu bappa, nothing daunted, went back to his bed and slept soundly for three more hours!

Our mad living in literature, as I have called it, was carried on even after we became separated by the exigencies of our different spheres of activity, I still continuing to be a student. This took the shape of what seemed to be an interminable and weighty correspondence — weighty because each time we wrote to each other (and that was at least once a week, if not twice) our letters were usually not less than 24 to 36 pages long! (I do not remember ever having written such long letters even to my wife when we were newly married!) I have called them letters, but they were not. Each 'letter' was a Miscellany of humorous anecdotes and skits, serious poems and doggerels, light stories and sketches, observations and criticisms — all wild, care-free writing. Neither of us had the least desire to see this writing in print. That is

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why we wrote to each other with such perfect abandon, out of sheer joy of writing. We started this correspondence because that was the only way we could still commune with each other in spite of our separation. My Vittu bappa's letters to me were, very often, so screamingly funny that I invariably fell into the habit of addressing him in my letters as 'Witty bappa'. (Pardon the poor pun, I was in my teens then.)

But the rosy dawn heralds the sun. It was in one such letter that he sent to me, along with some uproariously funny stuff, a poem which thrilled me to the core. It was 'THE SONG ETERNAL' (since published in "Poems" by Swami Ramdas).

Till then I had been familiar with his remarkable creativeness in the various forms of literature — stories, sketches, essays, skits, satirical pieces, versification, playwriting, etc. Nothing he had written had ever astonished me, for whatever he had written had been so characteristic of the man I had known so intimately. He had by then written a considerable number of poems, and many of them had shown a depth of feeling and artistry that was far, far above the average. But this poem, 'The Song Eternal', completely lifted me off my feet and made me think. Here was an entirely new side to my erstwhile 'Witty bappa'. Obviously, a flash from the Divine had illuminated his soul for a moment. But what a poet is there, worth his salt, who does not get such glimpses of the Divine at least occasionally? I contented myself with this reflection, and carried on my correspondence with him as before — on the mundane plane.

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Thus it can be seen why I was completely bewildered when early in 1923 I learnt that my uncle had suddenly left his hearth and home and gone forth in quest of God, treading the rough and thorny path of renunciation. I could hardly reconcile the uncle I had known so intimately with the *Sannyasi* he had set himself to be. The greatness I had discovered for him in seed form, and had envisaged for him in the future, was hardly the greatness of an all-embracing spiritual life. I had eagerly looked forward to his bursting upon Indian literary scene as a great literary figure — as an editor of ability and genius of some Indian counter-part of a journal like "John O'London's Weekly" or the London "Punch", as a teller of stories in the manner of W. W. Jacobs or Jerome K. Jerome, as a consummate artist in the field of the essay or humour, as an Indo-Anglican poet of no mean distinction, or as all these put together. Never for a moment, in spite of his 'The Song Eternal', did I believe that he, who had loved this life of ours so well and so much, would renounce it so suddenly or so completely for something, which to me at least, seemed then so intangible or so impossible of attainment.

But renounce he did, and that so completely and thoroughly too.

In far-off Tellichery I could hear occasionally the reverberations and rumblings caused by this great renunciation among our friends and the members of our family. I could hear angry voices raised, sense new hatreds born, and catch the echoes of all sorts of wild and fantastic stories thrown about in the air. I thought of my helpless aunt and her child at Mangalore, and I

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became very sad. I thought of my old grand-father at Kasargod, and became more sad. I became dimly aware that the intimate bond that had existed between my uncle and myself might also have become just driftwood in this great renunciation, and I became still more sad and wistful. But I had settled in life just then. Other interests had began to come into my life and engross me with their insistence. But somewhere, in the deep recesses of my heart, there was a vague unceasing pain that I had lost, once and for all, something which had been very precious in my life.

A year or so passed. I heard that my uncle had been discovered in Bombay and had been brought back to Mangalore by my aunt and her child. I hurried to meet him but with considerably mixed feelings, for I did not know how he would receive me or in what shape I would see him. Would he be my uncle still? Would the old bond between us still continue to exist?

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, I think. I heard that he had come just then to the house of another uncle of mine, the late Sri Sitaram Rao, from his cave in the Kadri Hill. I stood at the door of the hall in which he was seated, and looked at him. When I saw him I could hardly move from where I stood. It was not my Vittu bappa I saw before me.

Here, before me, was a thoroughly emaciated form, with rib bones all sticking out, and cheeks all hollow. His bony legs and arms were like thin sticks. He was seated in the yogic posture with legs crossed and eyes closed. A piece of rough *gerrua* cloth was round his

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loins, and one end of it had been thrown carelessly over his left shoulder. Heaven's light seemed to play about him, and I saw before me a picture that was all holy and sublime, the very picture, in fact, of the Emaciated Buddha, the Enlightened One, in meditation.

With an effort I went in, prostrated myself before him and sat near him. After some time he opened his eyes — they were sparkling with a strange divine light. When he saw me near him, a smile immediately flashed across his emaciated face — but was it a smile of recognition? I did not know. There was some all-embracing universality about that smile which I could not understand. For all my former intimacy with him, I had become just another 'Ram' to him. Tears welled into my eyes. A hundred questions leapt to my tongue, but I could hardly articulate them. I was so choked up with feelings. All that I could do was to sit there drinking him with my tear-drenched eyes.

* * * *

I prostrated myself once again before him and left the place with my wife. And when I walked back home, I was proudly conscious of the fact that my uncle did return to us and to the world as Swami Ramdas — as an Enlightened Soul.

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24

OUR BELOVED PAPA

Papa, Thou art Love, Highest Truth Thou art!
Compassionate! We enshrine Thee in heart.
Our thoughts with rapture towards Thee wing,
Merciful one, Thy glories we sing,

Differentiating not as high and low
Towards Thy children Thy love doth flow,
Radiance and Love shining upon Thy face,
Bringest together children of all race.

"Ram" is the sweet name Thou givest to all,
"Ram" is the sweet name no power can pall;
Thou leadest us to the Supremest gain,
Vision of Self everywhere to attain.

Gathered together at Thy feet we stand,
Thou in Thy mercy hast taken us in hand,
Weak and unsteady our feet though they be,
Secure we stand, Papa, sheltered by Thee.

Parent of all! all things rest in Thy care,
The worlds throb with Thy presence everywhere,
Lord! all the three worlds move at Thy behest,
Thou art everything Thyself manifest.

—Ramabai C. Trikannad
1947

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GLOSSARY

Ahimsa	Non-violence.
Avadhut	A sage who is oblivious of the world and his bodily existence.
Avatars	Incarnations.
Bhagvat Dharma	The mode of life in which man is conscious of the Lord in all actions, thoughts and things.
Bhajan	Singing of devotional songs.
Bhakti	Devotion.
Bhiksha	Alms.
Darshan	Visit or vision.
Das	Servant.
Gerrua	Orange-coloured.
Gurudev	Spiritual master or preceptor.
Ishtadevata ..	Favourite deity.
Mantra	Incantation.
Rambhajan ..	Singing of devotional songs in praise of Sri Ram.
Sadhana	Spiritual practice.
Samsara	Worldly life.
Samsarik ..	Pertaining to the world; worldly.
Sannyasin ..	Religious mendicant.
Vairagya	Dispassion.

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